



The Baker and the Wolf

Author: *J.M. Stengl*

Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy

Description: A mysterious stranger, an enchantress grandmother, and an overprotective mother. Can Cerise trust any of them?

Cerise DuBois might as well be invisible. Not even her scarlet cloak attracts male interest, and her mother begins to despair of snaring a husband for a boring middle daughter with no magic ability. If not for her baking talents, Cerise would be a hopeless burden on the family. Or so she believes until a dark man with eyes like gold appears in the family bakery to deliver an invitation from a grandmother she has never met . . . and real trouble begins. What if everything Cerise believes about herself and her family is false? Unlike other men, the stranger gives Cerise his undivided attention, yet he has a habit of vanishing when she needs him most—for example, when a huge black dog (surely it can't be a wolf) follows her through the city park. Worst of all, he claims that if she follows the magical path to her enchantress grandmother's cottage, her entire world will change. Should Cerise trust this fascinating foreign mage, or will he eat her alive?

Total Pages (Source): 41

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

Nobody has to tell me when he enters the shop. I don't know how I know, but I do.

Without looking his way, I wrap baguettes in brown paper and chat with Madame Carre. "Yes, I'll bake chouquettes again tomorrow. Be sure to come early, while they're fresh."

The man watches me from the end of the queue. I feel it.

Pride keeps my eyes on Madame's weathered face until she steps away from the counter and Old Jeanette Becque takes her place. While wrapping her order, I dare a glance, only to see him bending down to pet Miette, the bakery cat. She trills at him and rises on her hind legs to shove her face into his hand. What a flirt!

The first time he entered the shop, my little tabby girl stalked out there to hiss and growl at him. Now she adores him. He must have worked some magic on her; I'm certain he's a mage of some kind.

Every morning for the past two weeks he's ordered pastries and black coffee and then sits by the front window. He takes his time, pets Miette, and talks to her.

Where is he from? I've never seen anyone with such brown skin before. And his eyes! They glint like gold coins.

All right, it's true, Miette isn't the only one who's pleased to see him again. I'm dying to look his way, but I can't let him catch me at it . . . again.

My sister Suzette would advise me to look deep into the stranger's eyes and smile,

but I can't. I haven't smiled for so long that my face doesn't remember how.

My younger sister, Charlotte, often tells me I should flirt with my eyes and spark a man's competitive instinct. I'm not even sure what she means by that.

Mama says I should focus on what I'm good at: baking. Following her advice is easiest.

But really, what have I got to lose?

Well, there's always what's left of my pride . . .

I sneak a glance. He's reading today's menu board, arms folded over his chest. Oh! That glossy black hair waving down to his shoulders . . .

"Ahem."

My attention snaps back to Old Becque, as everyone calls her. She squints over her shoulder at the man, then raises one straggly brow at me. "My change?"

"Oh. Yes, of course." My face feels like I just opened an oven door. I quickly count out the coins.

"When your grandparents were alive," she croaks, "this shop was respectable. It's unseemly, a young, unmarried woman like you running a business and ogling every man that steps through the door. Even foreigners! But then your mother never has cared about propriety or modesty."

With the slightest of nods, I hand over her package. "Bonjour."

Old Becque gives me her sourest look, and I return it with interest. I'm not afraid of

losing her business—the baked goods at Maison Boulanger are the finest in the city. But the encounter leaves a sick feeling in my belly.

Mama would simply shrug it off. She says her old neighbors are merely jealous that she, the daughter of a shopkeeper, is now married to the mayor of our thriving city.

I serve two more customers, wrapping round loaves, croissants, and several éclairs. The stranger still waits his turn, and I suspect he openly studies me. Should I be flattered? Instead, I feel as if my hands and feet grew three sizes.

At last he steps up to the counter, which is really a table with a battered top, but it serves the purpose. “How may I help you, monsieur?” I briefly meet the stranger’s gaze, then glance around. Wait. He and I are alone in the shop. On a Friday morning. How did that happen?

He opens his mouth just as Miette launches herself from atop the pastry display case to land on his shoulder.

“Miette, non!” I exclaim. “That was rude! I do beg your pardon, Monsieur.”

Smiling a little, he reaches up to pet Miette’s ears, and she rumbles like a coffee grinder, rubbing her face against his hair. “No need. We are friends now, are we not, little one?” His voice is gruff yet smooth. And that accent! “So, Miette is her name?” His eyes twinkle at me. “No mouse will try to steal this sweet ‘crumb,’ eh?”

I can’t think of a word to say. I merely watch as he gently lifts her from his shoulder and cradles her against his chest. The little flirt rubs her cheek against his, purring with her mouth open. He glances up at me, and I see a dimple through his short beard. “She tells me no mouse dares enter the shop on her watch.”

It’s nonsense, of course, yet I half believe he is translating for my cat.

When one of his black brows arches in question, I realize I've been staring and blurt, "How may I help you today, monsieur?" Wait . . . I just said that. Now even my ears burn. "I mean, do you want an éclair?"

His lips curve up at the corners, and he leans slightly forward, still cradling my shameless cat. "Whichflavordo you recommend? Lemon or apple?"

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“Th-they are both delicious, baked from my grandmère’s recipes.” My mouth feels parched, but I forge onward, hiding behind my sales pitch. “And today we offer a new flavor of macaron: lime.” I stiffly indicate the glass-fronted case filled with delicate baked sweets.

He gives it a glance. “An impressive assortment. Who bakes the pastries?”

I casually slip behind the case as if to study its contents. Really, I want to hide. He’s being perfectly polite; I just don’t know how to react to male attention. “I bake the éclairs fresh every morning.”

“So, all these are your creations?” He sets Miette on the floor, brushes off his shirt, and approaches the case.

“Only the éclairs and chouquettes today.” And every day.

To my relief, he doesn’t press for information. “I’ll have two éclairs, one of each flavor, and a chouquette.”

“And black coffee?”

He hands me a silver coin. “If you please.”

Nodding, I fumble with the purse clipped at my waist, then count the change into his pale palm, which is callused yet clean. I carefully avoid touching him, but he closes his hand abruptly. The brush of his fingers sends a shiver down my spine.

“Keep the rest,” he says.

I back away without looking up, nerves jangling. “Thank you, monsieur.”

My delivery boy can have the extra coins if he ever shows up. My shop assistant is late too. And where is my normal crowd of morning customers?

The man settles at his usual table with his back to me. Morning light falls through the front window’s small blurry panes to gleam on his blue-black hair. He plays with a coin, making it appear and vanish between his long fingers.

I carefully arrange his selections on a porcelain plate, choose the best fork, and add a crisply starched serviette with a crochet-lace border. My heart drums behind my apron as if I just ran a race.

He leans back in his chair while I serve him. Despite my trembling hands, I manage to pour his coffee from a fresh pot brewed not long before he entered. He wears his leather vest and white shirt above worn breeches and boots, surprisingly clean. He even smells good, like a pine forest and horses. “Do you need anything else, monsieur?”

He looks up. His black-lashed eyes pin me to the spot; my knees feel like jelly. “I have a voracious sweet tooth, but three pastries should satisfy it for a time.”

Is he teasing me? Before I can decide, he nods to where his battered coat and hat hang beside my shawl near the door. “May I ask why you didn’t wear your scarlet cloak today?”

How does he . . . ? I can’t tell him that I left the cloak behind this morning because my mother always reminds me to wear it—a childish rebellion. I’m scouring my brain for a sensible response when he adds, “You don’t have to answer. It’s just . . . I’ve seen

you wear it around town.”

I blurt, “My shawl is plenty warm enough. If I get cold on my way home, I’ll walk faster.” Could anything be more awkward than . . . than me?

“I admit, I’m curious about the warding spell on it.”

“The . . . what?” A spell on my red cloak? “My mother might have weatherproofed it without telling me.” A logical guess.

He quirks a brow. “The spell wards off men, not weather.”

Did I hear that correctly? “A spell that wards off . . . men?”

“I thought perhaps you placed the ward because you walk to and from work in the dark each day. A beautiful woman should use a protective spell any time she walks alone in the city.”

Flattery? Irked, I mutter, “Like I said, if my cloak has any spell on it, my mother put it there.”

His brows nearly meet above the bridge of his nose. “But the magic is yours,” he says quietly. “There can be no doubt of that.”

I must get away. My hands are shaking, and my voice sounds almost shrill when I speak. “You seem like a good sort of man.” Actually, he looks intriguingly disreputable . . . “I don’t mean to be rude, but you must believe me: I do not have magic. I bake, and I run this shop. That is all. Enjoy your pastries, monsieur.”

I hurry behind my counter just as several customers enter, and for the next hour I’m too busy serving a steady stream of patrons to give the stranger more than an

occasional glance. But each time I look his way, he lifts his cup to me, and once he smiles. I should go refill his cup, but there isn't time. That is, I don't wish to take the time. I don't want him here anymore. He confuses me with his penetrating glances and his odd questions. A man like him is dangerous.

But why would a stranger—even one with wicked motives—invent something as random as a man-warding spell on my cloak? Has Mama placed other spells on my possessions without my knowledge or consent?

Even more troubling: Why would the stranger insist the magic is mine?

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

Before I have time to come up with a logical answer, Matthias, our delivery boy, pushes through the door behind me. “Whew! Busy today.”

“It sure is. I thought you’d never get here. How’d things go? Any trouble with the deliveries?”

“Usual, and nope. Monsieur LaRoche even tipped me. Says our bread sells his soups.”

“Kind of him, and I hope so!”

While I count change for a patron, Matthias unloads his delivery takings into the till. “Madame Lafitte wants two dozen more madeleines tomorrow,” he says. “And as many chouquettes as you can spare.”

“Just tomorrow?”

“Nope. Every day from now on.”

I chalk a note of it on the back wall. I’ll have to leave instructions for my . . . helpers. Without thinking, I sneak a sideward glance at my stranger. He smiles, his gaze like warm honey, and I feel as if we are the only two people in the shop.

“Need me to send Lizzy out here?”

I turn blankly to Matthias, who indicates the nearly bare cubbyholes and display bin.

“Oh. Yes. Tell her I need the rest of the pastries and another batch of baguettes. Anything you can find, actually.”

“Got it.”

He vanishes into the adjoining bakery, and the open door admits a yeast-scented wave of heat. A crew labors back there, mixing huge bowls of bread dough, forming loaves of varied shapes and sizes before loading them on paddles and slipping them in and out of brick ovens.

They’ve been at it for hours. Bernard, the boulanger, has baked delicious loaves here most of his life. He and his two sons and four grandsons handle all the bread-baking. I create some of the pastries—customers often say my éclairs and chouquettes are the best they’ve ever tasted. But the macarons and madeleines and pies and biscotti happen overnight.

Yes, overnight. A pair of brownies live and work in the family boulangerie. They’ve been here longer than even my grandmère could remember. Since I don’t have magic, I never see them. I thank them aloud every morning when I arrive and see the trays of beautiful pastries waiting, just in case they’re in hearing range.

Yes, it is unnerving to have invisible magical creatures in my shop, but I’m used to it.

Customers keep pouring in. All the cubbyholes and shelves are empty or close to it by the time Lizzy backs through the swinging door with a tray of éclairs in each hand, plops them on the counter, and vanishes with a hasty promise to bring bread.

Business is so brisk that I sell the last few baguettes and croissants before she and Matthias return with armloads of bread. While they stuff loaves of various shapes into the designated cubbyholes built into the back wall, I snatch two round loaves out of Lizzy’s hands and sell them.

I can't recall ever seeing so much business in one day. I'm just about dead on my feet. What's going on?

I glance toward the stranger, who now gazes out the front window, allowing me a clear view of his aquiline nose. He still twiddles that coin.

My fingers seem to tingle.

Magic. Something stings the back of my mind, demanding focus. Something . . . surreal. My heart begins to pound.

"Cerise!" Lizzy's voice jolts me back to reality. "You'd better stow those pastries in the case before they get smashed or dumped on the floor. I'll be right back with the rest of the bread and take over sales for a while."

Before I can react, she's gone.

A long and restless queue has formed at the counter. A man near the door shouts a complaint while I count change for an older woman who speaks and moves slowly. "Please have patience," I reply without looking up. "I'm working as quickly as I can."

Then someone starts shoving.

"Wait! No!" I shout, too late. The old woman staggers into the counter, and her shopping basket crashes into a tray of éclairs.

That tray slides into the other, and both tip off the edge. I fling myself toward them, but it's already too late. Even if by some miracle I catch the trays, momentum will send most of the delicate pastries onto the floor, and the rest will smash together and be spoiled.

One moment, I'm diving to catch falling trays.

The next moment, as if a blanket of silence dropped over the world, all is still.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

Including me.

My eyes focus on the trays on the counter, each neatly lined with pristine éclairs. By some miracle, there they sit.

However, the rest of me is far too focused on my own position to heed theirs. The strong arm around my waist and the solid chest against my back command my entire attention.

“I apologize if I offended you earlier, Mademoiselle DuBois.” Warm breath against my ear makes me shiver even as heat flows up my neck into my face. “I have never tasted better coffee or pastries. The apple éclair was my favorite today.”

I haven’t been this close to a man since Papa died, and this is no fatherly hug. I recover my wits enough to push his arm from my waist and turn to face him. “What . . .? How . . . how did . . .?”

Gold flecks glitter in his eyes. “But on another day I might prefer the lemon’s tang,” he continues as if I hadn’t spoken, his breath scented with cinnamon. “And the chouquette. . .” He kisses the tips of his gathered fingers while holding my fascinated gaze.

I can only gape from him to the rescued pastries to the utter stillness surrounding us. My customers stand frozen in time. Some mouths are open. One man resembles an angry bulldog, and a woman is scratching her ear. I slowly pivot to see Lizzy halfway through the connecting door, her arms full of baguettes.

The sight shocks me awake. I whirl around to confront him. “What have you done to my shop?” My heart feels tight enough to choke me, but I refuse to back down. “Stop mesmerizing me and put it back! All of it.” I swing an arm toward my customers and Lizzy. “Put everything back like it was. Now!”

A crease appears between his brows. “Not the pastries, I hope.”

I reconsider. “They can stay.”

He indicates the petrified queue of customers with a tilt of his head. “I might supply them with kinder attitudes.”

I scowl. “Don’t you dare interfere with them. No magic use is permitted in my store! Didn’t you see the notice as you entered?”

His eyelids flicker. “Nonsense. Every loaf you sell”—he indicates the cubbies—“contains magic. Then there are the brownies’ pastries, and what of your own magic?” He leans closer, studying my eyes until my knees go weak again. “Your magic is stifled, or maybe drained? I can scarcely—”

Shaking my head, I interrupt: “I don’t have . . . magic . . .” Even as I speak, I feel something flutter within my blood and bones, as fragile as butterfly wings.

“You know that isn’t true.”

“But how? How can I have magic?” More questions flood my mind.

“The same as anyone does: you were born with it.” Amusement and startlingly deep sympathy blend in his gaze. “Early tomorrow morning, meet me at the statue of your ancestor in the square out there”—he nods toward the door—“and you’ll receive an explanation.”

“An explanation of what? And how do you know—? ”

“If ever you’re frightened, chérie, call for Barbaro.”

“Who is—”

My voice cuts off. He’s gone. Vanished, as if he’d never existed.

Except I still feel the warmth of his touch.

Dazed, I realize that two customers are helping the older lady upright. I turn to see Lizzy shoving baguettes into their nook. How much did she see or hear?

“What just happened?” I inquire.

Lizzy glances at me over her shoulder. “I brought the bread, like you asked. This has got to be our busiest day ever. Can you believe it?” She motions toward the queue. “I’ll take over at the counter while you fill the— Oh! You already did. You’re quick, girl.”

I follow Lizzy’s gaze. The glazed éclairs make an eye-catching array in the display case, arranged to elegant effect.

He must have done it. My golden-eyed stranger.

Lizzy scans the room. Customers sit chatting at tables. Those waiting to be served visit among themselves or read the menu board. “Sure you need help? Looks to me like you’ve got everything under control.” She stacks the empty trays.

“I guess I do. Thank you anyway.”

Hours later, alone in the shop, I snuggle and feed Miette, write out the next day's menu, and lay out ingredients for madeleines, macarons, and custard pies, just to be helpful. I then lock up the shop and head home in a light rain, taking my usual route through the city square across the street. As always, I pause at a marble plinth to pat the booted foot of a bronze depiction of my ancestor Christophe DuBois, a woodcutter who became a founding father of Chartreuse. He carries a large bronze axe on one shoulder. I can't recall how many generations back in the family tree Papa told us he is, but it must be a good many— the city is more than two hundred years old.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

Shadows from streetlamps obscure the statue's features, but I know them well. Actually, I tend to imagine Papa's face in their place. My father was a ruggedly handsome man with a boisterous laugh and a tender, nurturing heart. He had magic. I remember the way he communicated with horses and other beasts. They loved and trusted him. He was a successful farrier and blacksmith, and wealthy people often sought him out to train their horses.

Somehow, even though it is cold bronze, touching the statue always makes Papa feel closer.

Beyond the square and across the orbital road lies the city park, a lightly wooded oasis with benches and occasional lamps to light the walkways. Cutting across it takes nearly twenty minutes off my walk, and I can avoid passing my old family home. Usually, other people are around at this early hour, but tonight I seem to be alone. Except . . . I glance over my shoulder. No people, but . . . Did the shadow under that tree move? The drip of rainwater from overhanging leaves would cover any footsteps. My spine prickles, and I walk faster.

The sense of being followed doesn't go away. I whirl around, and this time I see it clearly—a huge black animal right there on the path, its fur silvery with mist. A dog? It has long legs, a pointed muzzle and ears, and its eyes glow yellow in the dim lamplight. Surely a wolf wouldn't stray this far into a city, but . . .

I turn and walk faster.

The beast follows, silently flowing through the shadows. What can I do?

Words pop into my head: If ever you're frightened . . . Just above a whisper, I gasp, "Barbaro." A strange sort of name. I suck in a breath and shout, "Barbaro!"

Silence. And the wolf is gaining on me.

"Thanks for nothing," I mutter.

Seeing lights to my right, I take an intersecting path and run toward the bustle of civilization. Between trees, I see a carriage splash past on Grande Rue.

With my goal in sight I run faster, clopping along in my pattens. Around me, the trees give way to manicured lawn; only after I reach and cross the lighted street do I stop to pant. Most of the shops are closed, but I see lights in the windows of living quarters above them, and the tavern bustles with business. A few doors down, beneath the awning of Madame Lafleur's millinery shop, a shabby-looking man slumps with his back against the wall. I suddenly wish I hadn't rejected my man-warding cloak this morning. With any luck, he's asleep or too drunk to move.

When I peer across the street at my back trail, I see only darkness punctuated by circles of shimmering raindrops around the lamps. No sign of the wolf. Or dog. I begin to wonder if I imagined it. Whatever it was, it's gone.

Having no choice, I clop along the uneven walkway, calculating how many cross streets before I reach Place de la Maire. I hate passing the alleys between buildings; stray dogs and drifters are known to lurk in them. My shawl, cap, and skirts are soaked, and water drips down my face into my eyes. I'm panting, shivering, and miserable—

Something grips my arm and spins me around. "Well now, aren't you the pretty piece!" a slurred voice says. A slouch hat and darkness obscure his features, but I glimpse a stubbled chin and broken teeth. "Came running straight to me, you did."

I open my mouth, but an iron hand claps over it before I can draw breath enough to scream. “None of that now,” he warns. He spins me around, pins my arms to my sides, and backs into an alley, dragging me along. When I kick at his ankles, his grip tightens until I can scarcely breathe. “You want to stay alive, I think.”

My mind goes dark with horror and dread and lack of oxygen. I hear roaring in my ears.

Abruptly, the man drops me. Still lost in darkness, I collapse to my hands and knees on filthy bricks, suck in a breath, and nearly choke on the stench of refuse. I scramble upright to sway on my feet while my vision clears. When the roaring sound behind me clarifies into a cacophony of snarls and a man’s terrified screams, I stagger toward the alley’s entrance and around the corner. Without looking back, I lurch into a run—unevenly since I lost a patten. My feet are soaked, and my lungs are on fire, but my pace doesn’t slow until I climb the hill to the iron gates surrounding the mayoral mansion and slip inside.

Gasping and heaving for breath, shaking in every limb, I lean against the gate’s bars and dare to look back. Misty rain creates a halo around the lamp across the street. At its base I see a black form, a flash of white teeth in a panting mouth, and glowing yellow eyes.

“Thank you,” I gasp. I don’t know whether the beast is good or evil, but I do know it saved me tonight.

It is Friday night, so vehicles wait in the circle before the brownstone mansion’s front steps, their horses and drivers blanketed against the rain. My mother loves to host dinner parties. Hoping to remain unnoticed, I slip around the house, down stone steps, and into the dimly lighted hall beside the basement kitchen.

But Lille the kitchen maid has sharp ears. “Ouf, you’re here at last. Poor little chicken,

out in such weather, and your cloak hanging useless in the hall!” Clutching a turnip in one hand and a knife in the other, she shakes her head at me from the doorway. “No more sense than abambin. You should be at the party upstairs, not sneaking in through the—” She takes a second look and frowns. “What happened to you?”

“I encountered a drunk on the way home, but I’m fine.”

Lille exclaims in her dramatic way for several minutes before urging me along. “Hurry up to your chambers and get out of those filthy clothes. I’ll bring you something hot and filling.” She flags down a young housemaid with orders to tend to the young mistress. For once I don’t mind the attention.

Édith, who can’t yet be thirteen, exclaims over my condition all the way upstairs and while stoking the fire in my bedchamber. I don’t mind her chatter; she’s a good-hearted little thing. And Lille, as good as her word, brings up a tray of covered dishes. Taking comfort from their kindness, I even let Édith help me change.

Soon, clad in a bedgown and wrapper, my damp hair hanging loose over my shoulders, I huddle in a blanket beside the fire. Hot soup and bread soothe my body, and soon Lille will bring up my nightly cup of hot milk. I’m home. I’m safe.

But I stare into the shimmering coals on my hearth and remember, not my horrible attacker or those moments of terror, but gorgeous golden eyes. Sometimes they gleam from the face of a handsome man. Sometimes they belong to a black wolf.

Am I going crazy, or did today really happen?

Warmly wrapped in my scarlet cloak thanks to Mama’s solicitous care, I hurry through the park in pre-dawn mist. My head feels oddly heavy; I didn’t sleep well. Jittery, I keep checking my back trail, yet the park still feels like my safer option. That dog (it had to be a dog) fought off the real wolf, so if I see it again, I’ll try to have

a treat handy. Maybe it followed me because it was lonely or hungry, poor thing.

Nothing jumps out at me, and soon I cross the orbital street and safely enter the city square with its fountain, benches, lamps, and statues. When my statue looms into view, I see the silhouette of a man beside it. The sight of him is enough to double my heart rate. Sometime during the night I convinced myself that he wouldn't show up or maybe I'd even dreamed him. But here he is.

"You seem surprised to see me," he observes as I approach. Even by the dim light of streetlamps, his eyes gleam impossibly gold.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“Who or what is Barbaro?” I hadn’t intended to confront him, but last night’s terror still chills my blood. “I was attacked while walking home yesterday.”

“When you called the name, did help come to you?”

His question snatches the wind from my sails. “Well, this dog . . . But I don’t understand! Is Barbaro your name? The dog’s?”

“What matters is your well-being.” I see him pull something from the pocket of his shabby greatcoat. “I found this. Yours, I assume?”

I stare at my patten, then snatch it from him. “Thank you.” Lille told Mama about my misadventure—I should have known better than to confide in one of the servants—and Mama insisted I borrow a pair from Lille, so I shove mine into one of my cloak’s roomy pockets.

He preempts further inquiry by asking: “Did you intend to meet me here as I requested, or am I simply in your way?”

“It’s on my way. But I did say I’d come.”

He indicates the brass nameplate on the plinth. “DuBois. I’ve seen you pause to speak to it.”

“Oh.” So that’s how he made the connection. How else would he know? Just now, I’m too rattled by pretty much everything to worry about being seen chatting with a statue. “He was many generations back, but my father looked a lot like him. He was

proud of our connection with the town's founding father."

"Interesting family history." The kindness in that gruff voice disarms me. "May I escort you to work? I wish to speak with you about your family."

My mind goes blank. "I-I have to bake pastries," I managed to stammer.

"May I help?"

I stare into his eyes and feel my resistance melt like hot butter. I want to believe he's using magic to influence me, but then again, I don't. And how would I even know? When I nod, he offers his arm, and I lay my hand on it, feeling the rough weave of his coat. He is obviously poor, yet he carries himself with confidence and grace.

As soon as I unlock the shop door and the bell jingles, Miette's happy trill greets us, and I smell cinnamon and sugary goodness. I lock the door behind us and leave the windows shuttered. Neat rows of madeleines, hand pies, and croissants line the countertop, and colorful macarons adorn the display-bin shelves, leaving plenty of room for my own creations. As always, the old-fashioned bake ovens in the shop's back wall are stoked and lighted, and eggs, cream, and butter for my pastries wait on a window ledge to keep cool. The iron cookstove's surface is hot, ready for use. As helpful as I try to be to the brownies, they outdo me every time.

I hang up my cloak, and he hangs his coat on the next hook over. Then Miette leaps into his arms. Little flirt. Frowning, I wait for him to talk. He merely meets my gaze over my cat's head and arches a brow.

"Aren't you going to ask questions?" I ask. "Or explain things, like you promised yesterday?"

"I'm not here to pry into your business," he replies mildly, cradling Miette in the

crook of his arm and rubbing her belly while her paws open and close in rhythm with her purr. “And the explanations . . . they will happen in good time.”

His hands are large and callused from hard work, yet so gentle with my cat. Maybe this handsome appearance is an illusion. He might be a hideous goblin or troll for all I know.

But wouldn’t Miette see through a magical disguise? She is obviously smitten with him: eighteen dagger claws and four sharp fangs would shred anyone else who tried to rub her spotted belly. And that purr . . . well, it’s almost embarrassing.

Still, I ask, “If you’re not here to pry or explain, why are you here?” Another question pops to mind: “And if my cloak wards off men, how are you here?”

“The ward merely deflects interest. Anyone able to identify a ward can resist its influence,” he answers calmly. “I have no evil intentions toward you, Cerise DuBois.” His smile reveals teeth only slightly crooked. “Except, perhaps, to learn the secret of your pastry-baking magic.”

Is he . . . teasing me? My inward response to that smile is terrifying. I produce a creditable huff and state, “My pastries are good without magic.” I deliberately walk away, light every lamp, then briefly step through the back door into the main bakery. There, I don a fresh cap, tie on an enveloping apron, and return the baking crew’s greetings. I don’t mention my guest. Heat shimmers as one of Bernard’s grandsons slides crusty brown loaves from a brick oven. More of the brownies’ pastries wait on trays in case we sell out up front, which we’ve done every day this week.

Returning to the shop, I begin packaging madeleines—the exact number required, as always. Each one is perfectly formed and smells delicious. Matthias will arrive at opening time to deliver these and other orders.

“Your nighttime crew is productive,” he comments. “I imagine they clean for you as well.”

“Yes.” When I was little, I used to imagine the little people. I have a picture in my head of a tiny brown woman waving at me.

“Do they ever help your human crew bake bread?”

“No, only pastries.”

Miette heads for her morning perch on the windowsill. While I pour ingredients into a pan and stir them on top of the big wood-burning stove, my visitor wanders about like a self-appointed inspector. I’m aware of his every move.

“How can I help?” he asks.

“By not distracting me or getting in my way,” I respond.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“Very well.” He pulls up a chair and sits, near enough for observation but distant enough to be out of my way. His presence should annoy me, but I find it strangely pleasing. “You might try rolling some of this foolscap paper into a cone for me,” I suggest.

He quickly proves himself adept at rolling a piping bag around a metal tip and obligingly holds it for me while I scoop batter from the pan. Cooking, mixing, and piping choux pastry is already second nature to me, yet I quickly adjust to the convenience of his help—particularly with adjusting oven heat—and find myself enjoying the company. Before I know it, the éclairs are beautifully baked and the first batch of chouquettes is in the oven. I whip caramel-cream filling, take advantage of his help to fill a fresh piping bag, and ask, “Aren’t you bored of all this?”

He smiles. “Not at all. Watching an artist at work is fascinating. However, I would enjoy hearing about your family while you work. If it won’t distract you.”

I give him a look. “Why would you want to know about my family?”

“I wish to know more about you.”

“Why?” My gaze narrows.

He quirks a brow. “Is it so unusual for a man to wish to know you better?”

“Your question doesn’t answer mine. Why do you want to know about me?”

“You intrigue me.”

At a loss for a response, I manage to fill the pastries without spoiling one. Then I prepare a ganache. His eyes follow my every move, and he appears genuinely interested. But . . . why? This extended silence is unnerving.

He pulls his chair closer and props his elbows on the table. “How many more pastries must you bake today?”

“As many as will sell.”

I make the mistake of glancing his way, and his eyes twinkle at me. “Secret of the trade, I suppose.”

I glare down at the glossy glaze. “At least I have a trade,” I growl. “Yours seems to be loafing about.”

“What better place to loaf than a bakery?”

My lips twitch. Wait! Was that the beginnings of a smile? Startled, I jerk up one hand to check and smear ganache on my face.

My wide-eyed gaze meets his. He chuckles, flashing those strong white teeth, and my heart nearly turns inside out. “I think I prefer you without the little mustache, yet this look has its charms.”

No! I scrub the chocolate from my face with my apron and resolutely regain control before another smile forms. He is a mage. A dangerously attractive mage. And men are never interested in me. A gorgeous foreign man like him wouldn’t even see me, with or without my cape. Something more must be going on here . . .

Fine. I will talk about my family if that’s what he wants.

Once I begin, words start pouring out. “I have a mother and two married sisters, who each have a child. Suzette, my older sister, will soon have another baby.”

His brows rise, but he merely asks, “And your father?”

“He died when I was seven.” Telling him this is a mistake: my own words trigger the fear and loss I can never escape. As always, I control it behind a veneer of calm. “He went off hunting alone, but his body was never found.”

“I’m sorry.” To my surprise, his sympathy seems genuine.

I swallow hard. “Mama remarried a few years ago.”

“Any stepsiblings?”

“Three, but I never see them. They weren’t pleased when their widowed father remarried. Papa Louis-Baptiste is twenty-three years older than Mama, but she seems fond of him.”

“Do you like him?”

I dip an éclair in the ganache, then shrug lightly. “I’m glad he makes my mother happy. I seldom see him, but then they’re usually entertaining or dining out by the time I get home from work.”

“Does anyone in your family have magic?”

“My mother does . . .” My mind won’t quite focus there, so I move on. “I remember Papa doing fun tricks to entertain us, but his main magic was communicating with horses. He trained them and worked as a farrier.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“Yes, Monsieur LeRoy speaks highly of his old partner.”

I accidentally drizzle ganache across a pan. “You’ve met Monsieur LeRoy?”

He meets my gaze. “He recently hired me.”

“To do what?”

“I’m a farrier. LeRoy also recommended this boulangerie as the best in the city. He told me it belonged to your mother’s family.”

This almost sounds as if he were looking for me. I resume my work, struggling to focus my thoughts on what I need to do next. Oh. Mix more pastry . . . “Yes, her maiden name was Boulanger. Her family owned this business for generations.” I do my best to speak impassively: “When my grandparents passed away, only Mama remained to inherit. She married the mayor a few years later.”

“There were other relatives?”

I nod. “An uncle and some cousins left the city long ago. I barely remember them.”

“I am sorry for your losses,” he says quietly.

The sympathy in his voice soothes like a balm. I turn from the stovetop to nod my thanks. “Grandmère taught me the art of pâtisserie, and Grandpère was . . .” I blink hard against the burning behind my eyes. “They always seemed . . . sad. I only ever saw them at the bakery. Grandpère often said I was their joy.”

“I’m sure you were a great comfort to them.” His gentle tone draws my gaze to meet his, and my breath grows short . . . but then his brows draw together and his lips purse. “I do wonder why you labor long hours in your mother’s bakery while she moves in elevated circles of society and your sisters have their own homes and families. I assume they possess magic ability too, your sisters.”

Hearing him describe the situation so succinctly hurts. I resume my stirring. “Suzette and I have no magic at all.”

“Why do you believe you have no magic?”

With my back to him, I roll my eyes. “I should think I would know if I did! My mother reminds me frequently of my deficiency. Charlotte is the only one of us who inherited the gift: she can create fashions that flatter their wearer. Unfortunately, using her magic gives her a dreadful headache, so she avoids it. She married Albert very young, but then she only ever wanted to be a wife and mother, so she’s happy.”

I’m talking too much. Pinching my lips together, I feel as though I watch someone else’s hands crack eggs and blend each one into the pastry dough.

“Is the use of magic in preparing food frowned upon in this city?”

I give him a sharp look. “Of course not. Bernard, our head boulanger, and his sons and grandsons use their magic every day. Their loaves always bake perfectly.”

He looks thoughtful. “And you have the brownies to help you with the pastries. I assume you know them.”

My world closes in even further. “I cannot see or hear them.”

After a pause, he says, “I see. What do you know about your father’s family?”

Grateful for the change of subject, I answer readily, “Papa once spoke of taking me and my sisters to meet his parents, but he died before that could happen. Mama says they now want nothing to do with their granddaughters.”

“And you believe her?”

I shrug. “Why should I doubt my own mother?” Truth be told, Mama cuts off any discussion connected with Papa. Maybe speaking of him hurts her too much? I try to believe this, but doubt does sneak in . . .

“When did your mother give you the scarlet cloak?”

I flick a startled glance his way. “When I turned fifteen.” I intend to stop there, but follow-on thoughts pop out of my mouth. “Mama threw me a party in the park. I looked forward to it for days.”

“Your expression tells me this is not a happy memory.”

I give him a look. “After that day, my childhood friends all moved out of the area, and the boy I liked began following my younger sister around.”

“And married her, I’m guessing.”

Charlotte doesn’t know I liked Albert back then, and I intend to keep it that way. I focus on piping éclairs, but when he says nothing more, I can’t help sneaking another glance. Arms folded over his chest, he frowns, deep in thought, then muses aloud. “Could it be that your mother wants you to stay single?”

I stiffen. “Nonsense. She frequently tries to set me up with men.” Usually bakers at least twice my age or seriously unappealing. “You tell me the cloak repels men because of magic, but maybe it’s just too . . . red. I mean, my hair is red. It clashes.”

This was intended as a jest, but my tone is too serious. I don't dare look at him. "And when I'm cold, my nose turns red, too. Like my name, a cherry."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“So do your lips and cheeks.” In my peripheral vision, I see his head tip to one side. “Your hair is always tucked beneath your cap. I should very much like to see it.”

As if to illustrate his point, my cheeks burn. And yet, although the comment about seeing my hair was rather personal, I can’t feel offended even when I try. I don’t remember the last time a good-looking man showed interest in me. I manage to retort, “Never while I’m baking.”

After a pause, he asks, “Why does your stepfather not send a servant to escort you to and from work?”

“I doubt he has ever thought of it.” A fleeting memory of last night’s terror makes me shudder. I try to hide it by working faster.

“Any father figure worth his salt would think of protecting a beautiful young woman.”

“Perhaps if I were beautiful, he would have thought of it,” I toss back, attempting to joke.

Once again, it falls flat. Why do I even try? I’m not funny.

My visitor is silent. Without a glance his way, I slide trays of éclairs into the ovens and begin to fill the display case with finished pastries. But his presence is impossible to ignore. “Why are you interrogating me?” I ask. “Are you a lawman? Do you suspect me of a crime or something?”

“I find your situation interesting.”

My situation. Not me. I huff a humorless laugh. “Then you must suffer a terrible dearth of entertainment. My life is dreadfully dull.”

That came out sharper than intended, and he doesn’t respond. Suddenly afraid that I’ve annoyed or insulted him, I offer him a slightly imperfect chouquette. “Taste test?”

His face lights up. “My pleasure.” He pops the entire puff into his mouth, closes his eyes, and savors it, chewing slowly. A most gratifying response.

But I want to hear him say it. “Well?”

His eyes open like a sunrise. “Exquisite. I am honored.”

“A taste tester is worth his hire.” I meet his gaze and again feel a tremor in my facial muscles along with an almost giddy lightness in my chest. For the second time today. Why? I haven’t felt like smiling in . . . I can’t remember how long.

My gaze shifts to the front windows. How quickly the hours passed! I tuck a few loose hairs under my cap and rub my hands down my apron. “It will soon be time to open the shop, and I must finish the éclairs and clean up this mess . . .”

Although the brownies would do it, I don’t feel right about leaving my messes to them. I’ve been told they work for the joy of it, but I don’t want to take advantage. Sometimes I leave fruit and other little gifts for them. They always give me something in return—hand-knitted mittens or socks—which sort of defeats the purpose.

“Let me help.” He rolls up his sleeves, revealing forearms corded with muscle.

My heart pounds like a drum, and I don't even try to refuse the offer.

While I finish filling and glazing the last batch of pastries, he sweeps the floor. I'd half expected him to use magic; instead, he works hard. I catch myself sneaking glances at him. He is lighter in build than my brothers-in-law or co-workers; he strikes me as more masculine, more vital—almost radiating physical energy.

“Is ‘Barbaro’ your name?” The question escapes before I think twice. But why not ask? He's behaving like a friend, and I have too few of those to quibble over details like magic and mystery and . . . Okay, fine. He's the most attractive man I've ever seen, let alone met. Far and away.

He keeps sweeping, and I wonder if he heard my question. But when I look his way, he meets my gaze. “No, but I am most often called by that name.” His expression is closed. “It suits me. I belong nowhere.”

Barbarosounds like . . . itmeansbarbarian, I realize. His voice is heavily accented, and his skin is too brown to be merely tanned by the sun . . . especially in this region in autumn. But his manners and speech are impeccable. Far from barbaric.

I can't think how to respond so simply ask, “Is that what your friends call you?”

“I have no friends.”

“None?” I blurt. “But . . .” A sense of outrage for him sweeps through me, swiftly followed by realization. “I don't either,” I say quietly.

His gaze cuts back to mine. “Why not?”

I shrug as I display the finished éclairs. “Like I said, my childhood friends all left the area, and I have no time to form new friendships. My employees hardly count, since

they're obliged to be around me.”

He glances toward the front window, his lips twisting in a wry smile. “Same with my coworkers.”

“Monsieur LeRoy is a good man.”

“He is.”

“I expect he likes you better than you know. He doesn’t talk much since my papa died.” I turn away to count the coins in my pouch, and after what feels like a long silence, I blurt, “You may call me Cerise.”

“Thank you.” He tests my name: “Cerise.”

When he says it, my name sounds like music.

How many other girls does he charm with those eyes and that voice? Plenty, I suspect.

I carry two trays of excess pastries into the back room, trying not to make mistakes in my hurry. Will he still be in the shop when I return?

He is. Holding my gaze, he leans slightly toward me, his hands splayed on the tabletop. “Before I go, may I—”

“How long have you been a farrier?” I ask abruptly.

He raises one brow. “I learned the skills a few years ago but took this position only last month.”

“I’ve always loved horses, but Mama is afraid of them. I sometimes wander past the blacksmith shop just to hear the sounds and smell the smells again.”

His eyes hold both amusement and understanding.

“Sorry for rambling on,” I mutter and turn to list the day’s pastries on the wall board.

My mind blanks. Oh, yes. Éclairs . . .

“Cerise.”

Almost against my will I face him, pressing my back to the wall. Why do I suddenly feel as if I would do anything he asks? He isn’t fae. Or is he? Oh, I was foolish to give him my name!

“Cerise, will you meet me again tomorrow morning at the statue in the park?”

I feel my pulse throbbing in my throat. “Tomorrow is Sunday.”

“Yes. Your grandmère, Severina DuBois, wishes to meet you.”

A rock seems to drop in my stomach. “My grandmère?” My mouth opens and closes a few times before I manage to ask, “You know her? She is . . . well?”

“Quite well.”

Of course she is. Evil enchantresses must always be well. “But . . . why does she wish to meet me?”

“I assume because you’re her granddaughter.”

“What about my sisters?”

“She believes your situation to be urgent while theirs is not.”

I shake my head in irritation. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Only she can explain her meaning.” His tone is impersonal.

“She will meet me at the statue and explain all this?”

“No. I shall escort you to her. But this meeting is a profound secret. You must not speak of it to anyone. Particularly family members.”

I give him a look. “I’m supposed to go off somewhere with a strange man and tell no one? Do I look like an idiot?”

He doesn’t so much as blink. “She sent you this token.” In his outstretched palm I see a gold-framed miniature portrait of a boy with red-brown hair and smiling blue eyes.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“It’s my papa, isn’t it?” I have my father’s eyes. Although mine don’t twinkle like his did.

“Madame DuBois says if I lose this, I die.”

Hearing wry amusement in his voice, I again feel a flutter in my chest.

This situation might be easier to evaluate properly if he were an ugly brute.

Now I know why he asked so many questions about my family. Whether I agree to go or not, he will report back to my grandmére, so she will know everything I just told him.

Well, I want to know what is “urgent” about my situation. I want to know about her, too. I want to meet my grandmére, not just hear dreadful tales about her. Mama would disapprove. But I have a right to know. I could do it and tell her later. I’m not a child, after all.

“I can keep a secret. I will tell no one.”

He holds my gaze. “Madame wishes to train you, to teach you how to use your magic.”

“I’ve already told you I have none.”

“You have powerful magic.”

I nearly snort. “Believe that if you like. I believed I could do magic when I was little.” A vivid memory of animating the wooden horses my father carved for me pops into my head. “Papa must have done it.” Doubt laces my voice.

“He didn’t. Your customers enjoy all the baked goods sold here, but your éclairs and chouquettes are the greatest draw. Most humans wouldn’t understand why they taste so good; they simply know they want to repeat the magical experience.”

I shake my head. “You must be thinking of—”

“No,” he interrupts. “I can tell the difference between human magic and brownie magic. And your magic is distinctly yours. I would know it anywhere.” Without pause, he states, “You need instruction in its use and protection.”

Avoiding his gaze, I study the determined set of his jaw. He makes me nervous in a number of ways, but right now I struggle most with the I-desperately-want-this-to-be-true way.

I nod. “I’ll think about it.”

Although sales are as brisk as ever, that day drags incessantly. When I finally lock the shop door behind myself, I carry on one arm a basket filled with pastries I set aside earlier and a few leftover loaves of bread. They’ll be stale by morning, but I have nothing else to offer my grandmère. I hope she’ll enjoy them.

If my mother questions me about the basket, I’ll tell her they’re a gift for an old woman. Which is true.

The week’s cashbox weighs down my other arm. I don’t recall its ever being this heavy before. One bright spot: knowing that my cloak wards off men is a comfort while I’m carrying all this money. And maybe that dog-wolf is behind me

somewhere, ready to attack a mugger.

Or ready to wolf down my pastries.

Once inside the mansion, I lug my load up two flights to my room, stash the basket behind a screen, plonk the cashbox on my bedside table, then drop onto a stool and pull off my shoes while catching my breath.

I'm brushing out my hair when my mother taps at the door and inserts her head.

"Bonsoir, ma petite. How was your day?" Giving me a dimpled smile, she slips inside and roams about my room, touching and rearranging things along the way. Jeweled rings glitter with every movement of her hands. "This week has been so busy, we've hardly had time to speak. My dearest Louis-Baptiste and I are entertaining guests and will attend the theater later this evening, but I have time for a chat just now. Would you like me to ring for coffee?"

"No, thank you, Mama."

She sighs, pulling a martyr face. "This morning I find a gray hair, and now you call me Mama."

"Gray hair, indeed." As usual, my attempt at a smile fails. "You could easily pass for my younger sister." Really, no one with a heart could resent Gisella Boulanger DuBois Garnier for being distractingly pretty and youthful. She is just so . . . herself. Vain, insecure, and bossy, yet charming.

Gisella beams at me. "If you say so, darling." A crease appears between her brows. She reaches out to feel my forehead, then lets her hand slide down to cup my cheek. "You look so weary."

I suddenly realize what a long day it was. “I do feel fatigued.” I don’t even attempt a smile this time. There’s just no point. “Being on my feet all day is draining.”

“Poor dear. It’s a mercy you love your work.” Gisella’s brows arch. “How horrid it would be if you didn’t!” Her thumb smooths my cheek.

Finding her caress annoying, I turn away and begin brushing again. “Baking is my life. How could I not love it? But dealing with customers is—”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“Darling, you must sit down here and let me brush your hair to relax you.”

Before I quite know what happened, I’m sitting on the stool at my dressing table, and she vigorously wields my brush. I regard my wide-eyed face in the cloudy mirror, then meet my mother’s reflected gaze.

“How did sales go today?” Gisella keeps running her hand over my hair between sweeps of the brush. “Anything interesting happen?”

“Sales were excellent all week.” I point to the cashbox on my dressing table. “By the end of the day the pastries were gone and most of the bread. Bernard says they struggled to keep up with demand. We must be making a tidy profit. I think we should replace that old table with a real service counter soon. It would give the shop a more professional look.”

We discuss a few other possibilities for the bakery’s future before Gisella hands me my brush and picks up the cashbox. “I’ll have the totals for your books ready by Monday morning, darling. And remember: It’s your shop. If you believe a new counter would be the wisest way to spend potential extra income, then you should follow through. But you also might consider hiring more bread bakers.”

After a long day at work, her chatter makes my head throb. “Yes, Ma—”

“Ah ah!” She points a finger at me, one brow lifted, her full lips bowed in a teasing smile.

“Yes, Gisella.”

My mother rolls her eyes, laughing. “Seriously, Cerise, do I look old enough to have three grown daughters?”

“No.” I know better than to mention her grandchildren.

“Think of me as the fourth sister.” Her eyes twinkle. “Speaking of grown daughters, how is that baker lad doing these days? Bernard’s grandson. The tall one with soulful brown eyes. Didn’t he want to marry you?”

“He’s doing well, Mama. Happily married, with a baby on the way. And he wanted to marry Suzette, but she turned him down.”

“Hmph.” Studying my face and figure with a critical eye, Mama gives her head a little shake. More jewels twinkle at her ears; my stepfather does seem to enjoy spoiling her. “Twenty? I was married and a mother of three by that age. Time is rushing past. You must make a point of smiling more! Learn to flirt. Look interested!”

I can’t even pretend her remarks don’t hurt. “The men I find interesting never notice me.”

Even as I speak, a part of me insists this isn’t true anymore. Strange. I haven’t met any men recently . . . have I?

“You need to broaden the field. After all, responsibility and skill matter far more than charm or a handsome face.” She holds my chin and looks into my eyes. “You’ll be happiest married to a baker, of course. You’re right: we do need to bring in a new baker. Experienced. Hard-working. A man who can fill Bernard’s place someday. I know just the man.”

I’m on the verge of submitting when a rebellious memory pops out of my brain fog.

What comes out of my mouth next surprises even me: “I don’t want to marry someone as boring as I am. Since opposites attract, I should fall in love with a dangerous man, perhaps a powerful mage or wicked barbarian.”

A man with warm golden eyes, glossy black hair, and a perfect smile.

Gisella’s eyes pop wide, and she turns to set the cashbox back down. “You don’t mean that, Cerise.”

Maybe not the “wicked” part, but it felt good to say it. Rather . . . empowering.

Before I can speak, she smiles her brightest and tries to take my face between her hands. “Silly girl. You know I’m right.”

But I step out of reach and hold up one hand when she attempts to follow me. “Please, listen to me, Mama. I want a husband who will love and cherish me, not use me or try to control me. Someone like my papa. If I can’t find such a man, I’ll remain an old maid.”

For an instant, Mama’s green eyes look almost fierce. Then she laughs, grasps my hand, and waves dismissively in my direction, her rings glittering in the firelight. “Child, you say such silly things to get a rise out of me. Please say you don’t mean it.”

Sudden heat rushes into my hand and my face, and I open my mouth to recant. But a tiny distant voice in my head shouts at me to resist, and at the last moment I substitute, “I don’t know why I said all that, Mama.” Which is true enough.

“I knew you didn’t mean it.” Gisella sounds cheery. “You’re my good girl. Louis-Baptiste and I will find a practical and dependable baker for you to marry, and you will be blissfully happy.” After planting a kiss on my forehead, she hefts the cashbox

again and pauses to add, “I’ll have a plate and wash water sent up for you. Don’t forget, your sisters are coming for dinner tomorrow. Drink your warm milk and sleep well! And don’t forget to attend church in the morning.”

“Yes, Gisella.”

After she leaves, I stand still, trying to understand what just happened. I remember details clearly, but my brain can’t put them together into a whole. My pounding heart tells me I had a near escape, but from what?

I do know one thing clearly: I will go to the statue in the morning to meet Barbaro. I will meet my grandmère and learn everything she can tell me about my father and my magic.

I step outside into a morning bright with dew and sunshine. Sleeping in until nearly sunrise on Sundays is a treat. Mama and Louis-Baptiste are presumably still asleep. Their parties and outings tend to run very late and involve a fair amount of expensive wine and cognac.

Oddly enough, I always feel the most energized on the mornings my mother is hungover and exhausted. Sometimes I almost feel guilty about this, though there’s obviously no connection.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

Wearing my best dress covered by my red cloak, as I do every Sunday, I hike my loaded basket a little higher. No one will suspect me of anything but the strictest propriety; many people bring baskets of food to church for distribution among the poor.

The breeze chills my cheeks and nose. Soon it will be winter here, and the streets will fill with dirty snow slush. But for today, I enjoy the park's golden trees, not to mention the planters in the city square nearly overflowing with vibrant autumn-hued flowers.

As I approach my ancestor's statue, I glance around, feeling conspicuous even though few people are about at this hour: a few delivery carts rattle past, and servants rush out on the street to purchase milk, fruit, and eggs from hawkers. The shops are all closed.

"Bonjour, Cerise DuBois."

I spin about in surprise. Barbaro half reclines on one corner of the statue's plinth, arms folded across his chest. The rough leather boots, vest, and hat seem familiar, but his long black coat, clean woolen trousers, and linsey-woolsey shirt are new to me. Ordinary attire, yet the man wears it with *asavoir faire* that nearly stops my heart.

"Bonjour," I mumble.

He pushes himself upright and prowls over to inspect my basket. "Something smells amazing. Don't suppose you have one to spare?" He glances up at me, his bright eyes hopeful.

“They’re for my grandmère.”

He heaves a mock sigh. “I thought it couldn’t hurt to ask, but alas! rejection is painful after all.”

His deadpan humor takes me by surprise. I release a quick breath in reaction, my eyes squinting.

Wait. What happened? Did I just—?

“Thank you,” he says. “I can live on that brief but lovely smile for days. And I do believe you laughed.”

“What? No!” I blurt and press my fingers to my lips. Then I realize he gave me a compliment and I refused it. Now what do I say? I can’t thank him for thanking me . . . Embarrassed, I stand there like an idiot with my hand over my mouth and no idea what to do while heat rushes through my body and into my face. I’m blushing again!

This makes no sense. The man is beautiful and scary beyond anything I ever imagined. A compliment from him should send me running in alarm. But . . . he seems to be genuinely pleased that his silly comment made me laugh.

He breaks the silence with a quiet sigh. “Come. The morning is wasting. I’ll escort you to the smithy.”

“The smithy?” I echo in confusion. “Is my grandmère there?” What a strange place for a first meeting!

“The path begins there. You will see.” He indicates the direction, so I start walking.

“You could at least offer your arm,” I grumble as I pass him.

He appears at my side in an instant, lifting his elbow. “Mademoiselle DuBois?” I meet his gaze and see something that might be gratitude in his eyes, along with an emotion I can’t identify.

“Thank you.” I lay my gloved hand on his forearm. He stands taller and guides me along the rough walkway, avoiding mud puddles and placing himself between me and any passing vehicle. There aren’t many at this hour.

At first, I feel happy. Then, when my occasional comments receive no reply, I feel confused. Finally, I’m worried. Why is he silent and grave? Did I do something wrong? If so, I have no idea what it was, and I can’t think of anything to say to ease the awkward silence.

Did he find my backhanded request for his arm insulting? I’m tone deaf when it comes to wordplay and jokes. I should know by now to keep my mouth shut!

The city’s largest livery stable is located several streets northeast of the town center, and my father’s old smithy stands just beyond it, comprising a few small paddocks, a line of hitching rails, a large water pump, and covered work areas on either side of a small smoke-blackened office. The place is redolent with the scents of horses, sweat, iron, and ashes, and the very sight of it feels like home to me. Thin streams of smoke rise from the two forges on a Sunday morning; their fires are banked. Monsieur LeRoy works only for emergencies on the Lord’s Day.

Barbaro escorts me directly to the office. “I can accompany you no farther, but you will be safe.” He indicates the door with his free hand. “Your grandmère is waiting for you.”

My stomach pitches. “Wait. You mean, she’s in there?” I point at the small building.

A flicker of amusement brightens his eyes. “No, the doorway is a portal into a pocket

world. Follow the path, and you will find your grandmére in a thatched cottage. She will explain everything. When you return, follow the path, and you will find the door. It will open to you.”

His eyes hold my gaze until I acknowledge these instructions. “I will follow the path.” But a weight settles on my heart. “I must go alone?”

I cannot read his expression as he inclines his head, and my heart hurts a little. I lift my basket, fold back the cloth, and select a slightly squashed éclair. “For you, to express my gratitude for your help and your good company these past few days. And today.”

He studies the sticky treat, then removes one glove and accepts it. “Thank you.” His eyes briefly meet mine again. “You will be protected. Do not fear.”

“Will you be here when I return?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“I cannot say.” His voice sounds repressed. “But you will be safe.”

Does he mean my enchantress grandmére will protect me? I want to press for answers, but the longer I stand here, the more likely I’ll be seen by some acquaintance. My cloak might ward off men, but it is easily recognized. So I nod and lift my chin, trying to boost my courage. “Again, thank you for your help.”

He nods without looking at me. Facing the door, I suck in and blow out a breath, take a firmer hold on my basket’s handle, step forward, and reach for the latch.

The door opens inward, revealing a snowy woodland scene with a path of packed snow before my feet. Instantly, I realize I will be stepping into another world, this “pocket” world, with only Barbaro’s word that I can return. I glance over my shoulder for reassurance.

He is gone, as if he never existed.

Fear paralyzes me, and my thoughts race in circles. I should turn back . . . Only a fool would enter faeryland at the behest of a mysterious stranger . . .

But I step through and hear the door shut behind me, which makes my heart give a lurch.

Snow crunches under my feet as I walk. I’m not sure whether the cold or the magic steals my breath. Probably both.

I was wearing shoes and pattens when I stepped through the door. Now, I’m wearing

sturdy boots and fur-lined gloves. And I am toasty warm in my cloak. Barbaro's magic?

I look over my shoulder. The door and its frame stand alone in the falling snow. As far as I can tell, the path begins—or ends—there. So very strange!

I have no choice but to trust Barbaro's word that the door will lead me home when I return. Hefting my basket higher, I continue at a quick pace. A light snow is falling. My footprints won't last long. But the path is magical, so I ignore any worries about losing my way.

But I do have a feeling, a familiar one, of being followed. Losing patience, I whip around to look and see a long-legged black beast in the path behind me. It doesn't slink off into the falling snow. It doesn't flatten its ears or snarl. It simply returns my regard with round yellow eyes.

But it is definitely a wolf.

I turn and hurry onward. This beast rescued me from that drunken man the other night. And it shadowed me through the park, possibly even before I knew it existed.

Ironic, really. This wild animal is my only protector, yet it might decide to kill me at any time. I don't care. Right now, its presence is oddly reassuring.

I can't quite decide whether this forest exists somewhere in the real world or not. The abundant trees, the snow, and the crisp air remind me of a hike my sisters and I once took in the local mountains with Papa. However, the path appears level, and no mountains are visible against what little of the sky I can glimpse. Nevertheless, I feel breathless by the time the thatched cottage comes in sight.

I pause on the path to collect myself and catch my breath. And to study the rustic

little house situated in a bright clearing. Smoke trickles from its stone chimney but scarcely rises higher than the roof. Should I call out or walk up and knock?

Am I stalling?

Absolutely.

Papa often talked about his mother with fondness, smiles, and a hint of awe. Gisella speaks of her in tones of disgust and horror. I have no idea what to expect.

Setting my chin and squaring my shoulders, I approach the door, hesitate, then knock twice.

“Come in.”

My hand trembles as I lift the latch and push the door open.

The cottage’s interior is shadowy, and at first I see only a small fire burning on the hearth against the far wall. But then I notice a shawl-wrapped figure hunched in a rocking chair. Stepping inside, I close the door behind myself, then wish I hadn’t. The room is nearly dark. I’m so jittery, my teeth would chatter if I didn’t clamp them together.

“Come closer, child. I wish to see you.” The voice is hoarse and quavering. “Lower your hood.”

I obey, but something about the situation strikes me wrong. “Are you Severina DuBois?”

“Yes, I’m your grandmère. What a lovely cloak, child! And yet . . . Tut, tut! I didn’t expect a granddaughter of mine to be a man-hater.” Now the voice sounds insincere.

I retort, “If you’re half the enchantress my father described to me, you should know that I didn’t place the wards on my cloak.”

Her raucous chuckle sends chills down my spine. “My,” she croaks, “what a quick temper you have, my dear.”

“The better to face a mean old witch,” I mutter. When she laughs even harder, I snap, “And what big ears you have, Grandmère.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

At this, she falls back in her chair, cackling like a hen. “The better to hear your insults, child. Next you’ll be commenting on the size of my feet and teeth, no doubt.” She lifts a pair of bare feet straight out in front of her. They don’t look a bit gnarled or withered. When I see a flash of white teeth under the shadow of her shawl, suspicion overcomes my caution.

“Who are you?” I stalk toward the chair and tug the shawl off her head, then stagger back in surprise.

A handsome woman of indeterminate age gazes up at me, her expression impish and pleased. “I really am your grandmére. Hello, Cerise.” Her rich, mellow voice sounds more cultured than any I’ve heard in Chartreuse, even among the mayor’s crowd. “Barbaro warned me about your fiery spirit. He didn’t exaggerate, I see. Is your hair red?”

Without thinking first, I pull off my cap, allowing my braid to unroll over my shoulder. My grandmére sighs, smiles, and pats her own thick braid. “My hair used to be that vivid, but it faded, so now I color it according to my mood.”

A moment ago, I would have described her hair as gray. Now, it appears to be . . .pink. I can only assume this indicates a good mood as she hops out of her chair and gives me a quick hug. She is tall like my sister Charlotte, has a youthful figure, and looks nothing like any grandmére I’ve ever seen. Maybe she wears an age spell?

“I see baguettes poking out of your basket. Lovely! What I really want to taste is one of your pastries. Barbaro describes them to me but never thinks to bring me a sample, selfish beast that he is.” She pauses. “Now that I think of it, there would be

difficulties with that, but never mind.”

Before I can offer her the basket, she bends over it, lifting the cloth. “Ooh! Éclairs! Chouquettes!” She pauses to take my face between her hands and kiss my forehead. “A granddaughter who bakes magical pastries? How did I get so blessed? The macarons and madeleines look lovely too, of course, but your creations interest me more than brownie work.”

She steps back, gives me a once-over, and nods. “You’re quite a pretty thing. I suppose you resemble your mother, but you’ve got my hair and Gerard’s eyes, so I can still love you.”

I could tell her that I look nothing like Gisella, but why bother? With an oozing éclair in one hand, she leads me to a little table set with tea things. Speaking with a bite of pastry in one cheek, she points. “Look in that cupboard—no, the next one. Yes! That’s it. Bring that big plate, and we’ll set out all the sweets. I can’t tell you when I last tasted something this nice— No, actually I can: it would benever!”

While I shift the pastries onto the large platter, my grandmère pours fragrant tea into dainty porcelain cups. “We’ll save the bread for later,” she says while we sit down for tea. Nothing about this visit is anything like what I might have imagined if I’d dared to try. After her playacting when I first arrived, part of me wants to believe that her charm hides a wicked reality, but I just can’t. She’s too comfortable with herself to bother with façades.

“What shall I call you?” I ask, feeling shy.

Severina tilts her head like a puzzled dog. “Grand-mémé?”

“Do you like that name?”

Her lips twitch, and her eyes seem to laugh. “Not particularly. When I was little, my parents called me ‘Rina.’ What do you think?”

I try it out. “Rina.” I nod. “I like it.”

While we enjoy the tea and sweets, she tells me stories about my father as a boy. “He was our only child, you know, and we utterly doted on him. Gauthier, your grandpère, intended to train Gerard to follow in his footsteps, ultimately to serve on the Magic Council.”

“But . . . I thought Papa only had horse magic.”

“Oh no, he was a higher-levelburvisand might have worked up tocarovenlevel had he developed his skills. But Gerard had other ideas. He wanted to travel, and his passion was horses. When he grew up, he set out to seek his fortune without our blessing. He never came home.”

When I glimpse deep sorrow in her eyes, I instantly remember the letter he wrote to tell her we would soon visit. Recalling that horrible day for even an instant makes me want to shrink into nothingness. I manage to mumble, “I’m so sorry . . .”

Her sadness vanishes into concern. “Child, it was hardly your fault.” I glimpse another flicker of sadness before she gives me another smile and sets down her cup. “And darling, I have much to teach you while you’re here. No more reminiscing today!”

“Barbaro said you would explain everything,” I reply, feeling tentative.

“Hardly everything, but enough for the present.” Rising, she shoves a macaron into her mouth, then steps away from the table and flicks one hand. In an instant, our tea is cleared away, and I glimpse the cloth in my basket folding itself neatly.

“I’m saving the rest of the pastries for later,” Rina admits, still chewing. “We might work up an appetite before you need to head back.” She brushes her hands together, makes another gesture, and the furniture slides to the periphery of the room . . . which seems larger and much brighter than it did when I entered. “Now, first on the agenda, you must learn how to sense magic.”

I can only nod.

Rina’s expression is kindly yet serious. “You don’t believe you have magic, do you?”

“You and Barbaro both say I do, so maybe it’s true.”

Rina raises one brow. “I wouldn’t encourage you to value Barbaro’s opinion in general, but in this case he is correct. I need to study your condition more closely, but I believe your magic is being stolen.”

I frown. “Stolen? How can magic be stolen?”

My grandmére purses her lips. “This is what we must discover, child. Also, your access to your own magic is almost entirely blocked. Tricky, that. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen it done before.”

Trying to wrap my mind around these concepts, I feel slightly dizzy. “But why would anyone do that to me? And how?”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

Rina's eyes squint into glittering arches. "May I touch you, Cerise? I can examine your magic more easily through physical contact."

I nod. "All right."

Her fingers are cool around my wrists. She faces me, closing her eyes. I close mine too. I hear the fire crackle on the hearth, and I notice a kind of hum. It seems familiar, yet I cannot place it.

Then I realize that I don't hear it with my ears. I feel it. Deep inside me.

Magic. As soon as I recognize it, a wave of emotion nearly crushes me. All this time— Oh, how I've missed it!

"Yes, child. Accept it. Claim it. Your birthright. Your gifting. It is as much a part of you as your red hair and blue eyes."

As Rina holds me, I begin to sense her magic as well. It is intense, potent, and her grasp seems to fill me with strength. "What are you doing?" My eyes fly open.

"I'm replenishing your depleted stores, my dear. You might say I'm nourishing your magic."

As my magic builds and revives, I experience it in the same way I would sense my lungs expanding with fresh air or my heart swelling with joy. The power fills a void in my spirit, a lack—a loss—that I'd never been able to identify.

“But how could my magic be depleted? I didn’t even remember that I had it, so how could I use it up? Did it shrivel because I haven’t used it?”

“No.”

I frown. “Someone really stole it?”

Lines appear between my grandmére’s brows, and her eyes open. “I have never personally encountered magic theft before, but in your case it is the only logical conclusion. The thief also blocked your memories of using magic. Do you have any idea who might be responsible?”

A sick sort of feeling makes me sway. “I don’t.”

She releases me and takes a step back. “Here, take this chair, child, before you fall down.”

I obediently sink into the offered armchair, tip my head back, and close my eyes, willing the dizziness away. Now I can sense the magic of this place—powerful magic. The room and its contents feel real and solid, yet they are sustained by magic in a way I can’t begin to comprehend.

“Better?” Rina presses a warm cup into my hand. “Just relax and sip this. I added honey—it always helps stabilize me.”

“Thank you.” The tea is exactly the right temperature. “It’s delicious.” After a few more sips, my eyes pop open. Ordinary amber liquid meets my curious gaze. “It does help. I don’t feel so woozy.”

“That’s the honey at work. Bees and honey are magical in their own way, you know.”

I relax and feel my mouth curve. Another surprise. With one hand, I touch my lips, feeling the smile. “It really must be magical,” I murmur.

“Hmm.” Rina gives me a penetrating look. “If one smile on your face surprises you, the thief has robbed you of much more than magic and memories. Once you’ve recovered sufficiently, we will work on methods to prevent more such theft.”

She doesn’t push me, so I savor the sweet tea and allow its magic to fortify my spirit. When the cup is empty, I look up with a sense of hope. “I’m ready now.”

“You might as well remain seated.” Rina pulls another chair close to mine. “Do you trust me to enter your mind for a few moments?”

I nod without fully comprehending her question. “Yes.”

“Close your eyes.”

I do, and she takes my face between her palms. Suddenly, I feel her presence in my head and my body reflexively spasms. “Relax, child.” My ears hear nothing, yet I know her voice and gradually relax. “Good girl. Now, focus on my voice and on your magic. Can you feel both?”

“I can.” It takes me a moment to notice that my mouth didn’t move.

“First, claim your magic. Take hold of it and never let go.”

I vaguely realize that if I think too much about what I’m experiencing, it’ll make no sense. I recall the connection I felt when she revived my magic, and I try to go there.

But it’s even simpler than that: I’m already there. My magic is woven into the fabric of me: body, soul, and spirit. Only now do I begin to realize how incomplete I’ve

been for years.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“Now that you’ve reclaimed your magic,” Rina says, “you must live fully in it. If your magic is threatened, fight for it. To let it be stolen is to deny who you were created to be.”

I don’t understand . . . and yet, I do. Dimly I remember a time of devastating loss followed by a slow descent into emptiness. “I was just a child,” I murmur.

“Oh, my dear, I am so very sorry. If I’d only known—” She pauses, and I feel her struggle for control. “No dwelling on the past; we must focus on the task at hand. Now, Cerise, I will try to reach for your magic. You need to stop me. Do it so gently that I can’t tell what you’ve done.”

Instantly, I sense her intrusion. I simply will my magic to slide away from her as easily as I conceal my private thoughts.

“Oh, good work!” Rina says. “I don’t sense your magic anywhere.”

“You couldn’t see what I did?”

“I know only that your magic isn’t anywhere I expect it to be. Now, whoever has been stealing your magic will panic if you withhold it entirely like that. You must conceal your awareness of the theft until you can identify the thief.”

“You’re saying I have to let my magic be stolen again until I know who’s stealing it?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Howev—”

“But I knew exactly when you entered my head, so I should know who the thief is now that I’ve got my magic back.” She doesn’t answer right away, so I prompt, “Right?”

“If you’re awake at the time, you might know.” I sense her uncertainty, which isn’t exactly reassuring. “Cerise, you must understand that, to my knowledge, this situation is unprecedented. Some unidentified magic appears to be involved. I need time to research possible explanations.”

I’m too ignorant to know whether I should feel frightened or angry or what. “My father told me that you and my grandpère are on the Magic Council. Do you intend to arrest the thief?” Theft of magic must be a crime, like any other theft.

“He informed you correctly, and yes, we do.”

“After I tell you who it is.”

“Ideally, yes. And once we identify the origin and capability of the illicit magic involved.”

I open my eyes. In my grandmère’s face I see frustration, but I also see fear and determination and . . . is that . . . love? For me? A granddaughter she never laid eyes on until today?

“Ideally,” I echo aloud. “What if the thief figures out that I’ve been here, steals all of my magic, and kills me to keep me from telling you anything?”

“That hypothetical outcome is precisely what we will work to avoid through your magic lessons today,” she says, her blue eyes nearly sparking. “Are you ready?”

I think it over. What better option do I have? Exactly . . . none.

“I’m ready.”

“So,” Rina says, “let’s focus on hiding and safeguarding part of your magic. Find a safe spot for it and put up an impenetrable barrier.”

“How much should I hide away?” Which is, I realize now that I’ve asked it, a useless question. I have no idea how to measure or divide my magic.

She continues as if I didn’t ask. “We don’t know how often they steal from you, but I suspect it happens regularly. It should take a while for the thief to notice the diminishing supply. Let them steal from what you offer, and work on bulking up your magic until you’re strong enough to prevent any theft at all.”

“But what if, while they’re stealing my magic, they use it to locate the part I hid?”

“The idea is to prevent the thief from noticing that part of it is missing until you develop enough power and dexterity to hide it all. Keep in mind that once your magic is stolen, it is no longer yours, so it can’t reveal your secrets.”

She says all this with sincerity and concern while I’m thinking that if my brain follows hers into even one more twist or turn, it’ll be a hopelessly knotted mess.

“All right.” And I just . . . do it: I build a mental wall around a large portion of my magic. And, after all that angst, I find the task ridiculously easy.

“Well done.”

Feeling Rina’s fingers slide off my chin, I open my eyes. “I’m not happy about this,” she says, “but when you step out of my pocket world, you’ll be on your own again. For reasons I can’t yet divulge, I don’t dare enter your city until we’ve pinned down the thief, which is why I’ve been working through Barbaro. He’s less than ideal as a

go-between, but he doesn't dare thwart my plans."

"Who is he? Barbaro, I mean." I try to appear mildly curious, but my heartrate sped up as soon as she spoke his name.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“If you must know, he’s a prisoner.”

That word stops me cold. Was my first impression of him as a dangerous man correct after all? “Do you mean he’s committed a crime?”

“Far more than one. The man is a nefarious criminal. But you needn’t worry: he won’t dare harm you.”

This makes no sense at all. A fist seems to grab my heart and squeeze. “What did he do?”

“Nothing was off-limits to that monster. He sold his magical services to criminals: coercion, murder, blackmail, and a long list of other offenses I don’t care to mention. It took five of us to catch and then restrain the creature until a trial before the full council could be arranged. And after he was found guilty on all counts—mind you, he didn’t even try to plead innocent, just threatened to kill us all—every council member contributed to his sentencing. He serves his life sentence by working for the council and its various agents. Gauthier took him along to South Ordonusia last year to untangle a nest of hags and incubi, and this year he works for me. He may put on a charming front, but never trust him, Cerise. He is a beast. Steeped in evil deeds. A barbarian in the ancient sense of the word.”

Why do I have this horrible sinking in my gut? I can’t process this information all at once, but one point is clear. I give her a look. “You sent an evil barbarian to make first contact with me, your granddaughter?”

She blinks rapidly. “When you put it that way, it does sound dreadful.”

“Rather.” Anger nearly nauseates me. Or is this more than anger?

“Dear girl, we keep him under such deep magical restrictions that he can’t harm you or anyone else without killing himself. The slightest insubordination causes him pain that would make a mountain troll stop and reconsider!”

A pang of pity reveals how pathetic I really am. “Can you trust him to deal honestly with you?”

My grandmére frowns. “Yes, but only because he has no choice. He may appear polite and respectful, but we know better than to imagine he will ever reform—his will to dominate is too strong.”

“Good to know.” I hope she can’t read my mind. I don’t want to read it myself. I must focus on magic. Focus on my grandmére. Never let her guess that after one glance from his gorgeous eyes, one smile, I melted into a puddle of goo. “You needn’t worry about me,” I add, thankful that Rina isn’t currently inside my head.

I’m furious with myself. But my heart feels like it might be bleeding inside where no one can see.

“What magic can he do? I mean, could he tell if someone tries to steal my magic?”

My grandmére pauses, blinks. “Yes, he probably could.” She gives me a doubtful look. “But never trust him to be forthcoming with the truth.”

Nodding, I resolve again to view him as my enemy.

But . . . he has been genuinely kind to me, asking nothing in return.

“I really must send you back now,” Rina sighs. “In a piece of fairyland like my little

pocket world, time cannot be trusted to match the human world's pace. Frustrating—I have so much more to teach you! Do you feel confident about this first lesson? Blocking the theft of your magic, I mean.”

I shake my head slightly. “I wouldn’t claim confidence exactly, but I’m ready to try.”

My grandmére’s expression is difficult to read. “I don’t wish to make you paranoid, child, but keep your guard up even among your nearest and dearest. The thief could be a servant, an employee, a customer . . . even a family member.”

My heart sinks. “I hate the idea of living in suspicion of everyone I know.”

“I understand.” Rina’s voice cracks, and she shakes her head. “Come here, child.” She opens her arms, and I walk into them, appreciating the warm embrace. Now that I’ve met my grandmére, I wonder how much happier my life might have been with her in it. Just being near her makes me feel stronger.

A few minutes later, she fastens my cloak beneath my chin as if I were a child.

“You needn’t worry,” she assures me. “The forest path leads directly to the door into your city, and Barbaro will keep an eye on you until you’re safely home.” A line appears between her arched brows. “He tells me he cannot enter your stepfather’s property, so you’re on your own once you pass its gates, which is unfortunate.”

“I will be wary,” I promise, reaching for the doorlatch.

I step outside into the winter chill, grateful for my cloak, boots, and gloves. The lighting looks exactly like it did when I arrived that morning—sharp and silvery. Time does seem to be a variable here. The forest path is clear despite steadily falling snow.

Suddenly eager to return to my own world, I hurry onward, boots crunching with each step. Will Barbaro be waiting for me at the smithy?

Then I glimpse the wolf amid the trees to my left. My blood instantly chills in my veins, and my body tenses for a wild dash. But my brain retains sense enough to hold me to a slightly quicker walk even as the beast approaches in a series of leaps through the deep snow, its outline becoming clearer through the shimmering snowfall.

“How did you get here?” I blurt.

It leaps directly into my path, shakes snow from its dark coat, opens its mouth in a huge yawn, and turns to trot ahead of me. Leading the way.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

I would have liked a moment to ponder the strangeness of the situation, but there isn't time. I break into a trot to keep up. The wolf's body and tail are thickly furred, but its legs are long and skinny. After that glimpse of its sharp teeth, I'm grateful it's no longer behind me, although it does seem . . . friendly. At least, not intending to eat me in the immediate future.

When the door appears ahead as a dark rectangle against the snow, I breathe easier. But then the wolf stops between me and the door. "Um, thank you for the escort," I say.

It doesn't meet my gaze, but I think I see its tail wave slightly before it leaps off the trail and bounds away through the snow. A sudden sense of urgency compels me to open the door . . . and there before me lies the smithy's familiar courtyard.

Suddenly panicked, I almost fall through the door. It swings shut with a click behind me. I inhale a deep breath and blow it out in one long sigh.

"You did well." The gruff voice gives my heart a jolt. I slowly turn, and there he stands within arm's reach. My grandmére's revelations rush through my head even as my heart pumps in relief and excitement. His black-lashed amber eyes express emotions I can't decipher.

"How do you know?" I ask, my voice breathless.

"I listened to everything." One corner of his mouth turns up, but still his eyes look . . . resigned? Sad? "Severina knew I would. Her words of warning were intended for my ears as well as yours: You must guard your heart."

I don't have a clue how he listened from out here, and I doubt I would understand if he explained. "Is it true? All that she told me about you?"

"It is true, although it's not the complete tale. Every story has at least two sides."

"Then you must tell me your side." The words sound like an order, but he doesn't seem offended.

"I'll tell you while we walk."

I glance around the courtyard. Judging by the sun's angle, it's late afternoon. A customer talks with Monsieur LeRoy at his forge, but they take no notice of us.

"We're hidden," Barbaro assures me. "I will screen us from view until you're safe."

"And you'll tell me?" I ask urgently.

"I keep my word." His expression tentative, he offers his arm again. Feeling defiant, I take it and set off with a long stride. It's a good thing he doesn't question my behavior, because I couldn't explain a thing just now.

The city streets are quieter than on a weekday afternoon, but a fair number of people stroll along the walkways, taking advantage of the fleeting sunshine. I recognize customers from my shop, which doesn't matter, because no one can see us walking arm in arm.

"In short, I was an angry boy who made very bad choices," he begins, guiding me into a cross street. With a sidelong glance, he adds, "But I know you want the long version, so here it is. I grew up on the streets of a city on the south coast of this continent. People said my father was a notorious sorcerer from a land across the southern sea, a barbarian. I don't remember him, but I do remember my mother. She

died when I was very young of some wasting disease, or maybe starvation. To survive after her death, I preyed on rats and other small animals and birds in the city at night, and I hid by day.”

I listen, gripped with horror and pity, unable to speak. But he doesn’t seem to expect a response.

“When I discovered the use of my magic, I began to barter my abilities to criminals—thieves, slavers, pimps—in exchange for food. One or two attempted to capture and enslave me but failed. I robbed, maimed, cursed, and killed without a qualm. I lived in this way, with the ignorance of a child, the morals of a predatory animal, and the blind rage of the desperate, for maybe ten summers. I had a high opinion of myself and no sense at all. When a nefarious criminal hired me to use my magic, I did his bidding without a qualm . . . and many people died. Important people. And their families.”

His tone is heavy, and although I hold his arm, he feels distant. “I cannot say that I felt regret or horror. I was satisfied with my pay, able to purchase new clothes and to eat well for a week. In my ignorance, I neither knew nor cared that my last transgression drew the attention of the International Council of Magic. I now realize what a monstrous deed I committed. But at the time I thought and behaved like a beast, with no conception of good and evil. Only dominance and survival. I believed myself to be the greatest mage of all time.”

He glances my way. “And then I met five members of the magic council and learned better.”

“Including my grandparents.”

“Yes. I fought wildly, but they worked as a team and overcame me. I now wear many unbreakable bonds, and I will spend the rest of my life hunting down other evil mages

as penance for my crimes, which, I cannot deny, were heinous. At times, my memories haunt me.” He avoids my gaze, distancing himself further, and we walk in silence for a time.

I can’t begin to imagine what evil he’s committed, but I clearly hear the resignation and sorrow in his voice. Rina would tell me it’s an act, but I can’t help remembering his kindness, gentle manner, and subtle humor while he helped me bake the other day. If that was playacting, he is a consummate actor.

Deep in thought, I scarcely notice our surroundings until I hear a metallic sound that reminds me of the nerve-torturing racket my cast-iron oven makes when I close its door. “What was that?” I stop short, trying to figure out where it came from. So does Barbaro.

We stand across the street from the city square, having approached it from a different angle. The sun hovers above the horizon to the west, peeking beneath a high cloud layer to make the autumn leaves on every tree within sight glow like fire. Barbaro’s narrowed gaze scans the square with its monuments and fountain, studies the half-timbered buildings along the intersecting streets, then skims across to study the park, where a few people stroll the paths, enjoying the fall color.

Me? I take advantage of his distraction, sneaking looks his way. Each time I see the man, he’s better looking. As in, so attractive I can hardly breathe. I know I shouldn’t think about him this way, but . . . Really, is his shocking past entirely his fault? He can’t help being illegitimate and orphaned. He had no say about inheriting his father’s magic, and no one in his life bothered to instruct him in morality.

Until my grandparents came along, that is. Did they teach him good manners and respect for others? Someone obviously did, because he is more well-spoken and gentlemanly than any man I’ve met since my father died. Rina doesn’t believe he could possibly be a reformed character, but why not? Is he so powerful that the

council mages are afraid to give him a chance?

It's a fact that I don't know much about men. But I believe this one finds me appealing. Not just my appearance but the I am inside. I think he cares about me. But I'm young and inexperienced—maybe he told me that story to soften my resistance to his charms. How can I consider myself a better judge of character than five mages who've lived longer and experienced far more than I have?

“Cerise?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

I snap back to reality and meet his quizzical gaze. Have I been staring at him all this time? “Sorry. I was thinking.”

“Troubling thoughts, from your expression.”

“Not all bad. I learned so much today. It’s a lot to process.”

A shadow crosses his face, and he nods. “I understand.” One of his dark brows rises. “Do you wish to stand here longer, or shall we move on?”

I can’t help smiling as I tug on his arm. “Let’s go. Did you figure out what made that noise?”

“Not yet, but I will.” His voice has an edge. “Would you like to walk home through the park? I know it’s your usual path.”

“Yes, please, but first, the square. I love this time of day but seldom have opportunity to enjoy it.” Before we cross the street, I slip my hand from his forearm into the crook of his elbow. It feels more companionable.

“I am honored to walk with you, Cerise.” His low voice makes me shiver.

“I’m grateful for your protection and friendship.” My voice trembles. Does he notice? Of course, he does. But he can’t know what I’m thinking. Or can he? I’ve never sensed him in my head—surely I would have noticed.

We approach my statue, and the sight of its weathered bronze face brings a soft ache

to my heart. I tighten my grip on Barbaro's arm. "I'm remembering things now."

"Good things?"

"Oh, yes!" Sudden happiness nearly chokes me up, but I can't wait to share this memory. "Whenever we girls walked in the park with Papa, he would stop and pretend to carry on a conversation with Grandpère Christophe." I grin. "But he called him 'Great-great-great-great-great . . . ' until we started giggling and ordered him to stop. And then he would tell the statue about each of us. One time he told it how Suzette hosted pretend dinner parties for our dolls, and Charlotte sewed clothes for hers—to wear to the parties, of course."

"And you?" Barbaro asks with a quiet smile.

The wonder of remembering—and so clearly!—makes my voice tremble. "I contributed 'pastries' made of mud and grass, using my magic to make them pretty. Charlotte tried to eat one once. We all laughed so hard when Papa told the statue that part. None of us realized he'd been watching our play."

Barbaro listens attentively, studying my face.

When I meet his warm gaze, I smile, then abruptly remember his horrific childhood. "Oh! I'm sorry for rattling on like that. I mean . . . You don't . . ." I babble.

"Please, don't apologize." His elbow presses my hand against his side. "Your story illustrates what family and childhood should be." Looking up at the statue, he touches his hat brim. "You, Christophe DuBois, would be proud of your descendants—one lovely young maiden in particular. I am honored to know her."

Again I fall silent, my heart too full and chaotic for words as we walk to the park and enter its forested paths. This scene is so different from the snowy track in my

grandmère's pocket world—golden and glowing rather than crisp and white. And here I have a handsome escort, not a wolf.

Feeling his gaze on my profile, I swallow hard. What would it be like to kiss him? My face heats as I dwell on the thought. My grandmère would adamantly disapprove. So would my mother. And probably everyone else in my life. But just now, I don't care.

I know I'm a fool to fall in love, or whatever this is, with a magical convict. I almost hated him at first. But why? If I'm honest with myself, it was fear. Fear of how attracted I felt to him. Fear of . . . oh, everything!

I'm twenty years old, and I've never been kissed by a man. I mean, well, my father kissed me plenty of times, but that's totally different. Honestly, I've never wanted a man to kiss me until now. Not really. Always before, the concept was more of a procedural curiosity. Now, it feels like a need. I can only hope he might feel the same way.

But I have no idea whatsoever how to encourage him. Is it even a possibility? With all the magical restrictions and bindings on him, something terrible might happen to him if he tries to kiss me. Some kind of torture—or he might simply vanish, and I'll never see him again.

“How do you feel about your magic lesson today?”

I snap back to reality and force my overwrought emotions to simmer down. “It was incredible,” I admit. “It was as if Rina opened a part of my mind that's been locked for years and years. I could communicate with her in my mind, and she taught me how to protect my magic.”

We take a roundabout route, walking paths I haven't seen in years. I chatter on for a

while, caught up in my own narrative. However, I know exactly when he lowers his forearm and my hand slides slowly down until our hands clasp. We can't link fingers very well while wearing gloves, but my heart races anyway. Even when a cold wind buffets my face and falling leaves spiral around us, I feel warm and excited and hopeful. I don't even know this man's real name—does he?—but I don't care. Just now, I think I could spend the rest of my life with him. He treats me like someone who matters, whose opinions and thoughts matter. Like his equal, or even better.

Our steps slow, and I realize that no one else is in sight. Perhaps the drop in temperature chased people away. I sense that he is gathering his thoughts to speak to me—also, that I might not want to hear what he intends to say. I drop my basket, turn to face him, and see his beautiful eyes widen just as I wrap my arms around his neck. My lips more or less crash into his, landing off-center.

He freezes for a worrisome instant, but then his mouth shifts and softens over mine until the kiss is perfect. I press closer, hoping he will hold me. The scent of him, the blend of urgency and tenderness in his kiss—I want more! Although his arms remain at his sides, for a few blessed moments I feel our souls entwine.

But then he gently grasps my forearms to ease me away, and our lips part. Disappointment rushes through me.

“Cerise.” His voice is a mere rumble. In the deepening shadows of dusk I see his golden gaze and wonder if his eyes might be lit from within.

We face each other in silence, attempting to control our breathing. Then he picks up my empty basket, beckons me toward a leaf-strewn bench, and brushes it clean. After I sit, he sits facing me. I reach for his hands, relieved when he returns my grasp. “Please don't tell me I shouldn't have kissed you,” I beg.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“Never. Although I must adhere strictly to the rules of my bondage, your grandpère would tell you that I delight in exploiting the rare loophole.” His eyes briefly glint with humor. “This one is new to me.”

Even as he speaks, I become aware of the intricate network of spells encasing him, almost as if I can see it. Layer upon layer of magic with countless trigger points. Is he revealing his shackles to me, or has my magic ability improved that much in one day? Just moments ago, I reached right through that mess of spells.

“Since I don’t have to follow those rules,” I guess aloud, “I exploited that loophole for you.”

A brief flash of his smile is confirmation.

“So, your actions and words are tightly constrained,” I state, pondering.

He is silent, but I see his brows twitch. I’m right, I know.

“You took a risk in holding my hand.” I think back. “Although I sort of made that happen too.” Which is slightly embarrassing.

“I am grateful.”

A simple statement of fact—his tone holds all the depth of meaning. I continue: “You cannot touch me except in conventional ways, such as to offer your arm when I practically ordered you to, or in an emergency like you did when the tray of pastries fell,” I conclude.

“Your grandmère grants me personal privacy within my constraints,” he says quietly. “She assigned me to observe you and accepts my daily reports without delving into my emotions. Words can’t express how greatly I value her generosity. She doesn’t know—although she might suspect—that after the first day, I would have spent every possible moment in your presence without her orders to do so.”

“Really?” Feeling bold, I arch one brow. “You were hoping for free pastries?”

“Are free pastries a possibility?”

“I could save you a few at the end of the day.”

Again I glimpse his smile, and his boot nudges the basket at my feet. “I’m hoping for apple éclairs again tomorrow.”

The deepening darkness emboldens me. I gently squeeze his hands. “Come and help me make them in the morning?”

I hear his breath suck in. “I accept your invitation.”

Lighthearted as a child, I jump to my feet, and when he stands beside me, I pull his head down for another kiss. I have no experience at this, but it doesn’t seem to matter. Although his hands and arms remain at his sides, his quickened breathing and eager response are encouragement enough. I shove my fingers into the thick, soft hair behind his ears and kiss his cheek, enjoying the scrape of whiskers. He sighs and turns his face, speaking against my palm, “Cerise, I cannot say what I . . . I have never . . .” His voice trails off.

“Do you want me to stop?” I ask, concerned at his tone.

“No!” Then, more softly, “Yes. My wardens might detect . . . I fear triggering the

spells. I don't fear the pain, but if they find out . . .”

“They might take you away from me forever?” I guess, letting my hands drop to his chest.

He slowly nods. “Our time together cannot last long, but every moment is a gift.”

More disappointed than I want him to know, I step back and stoop for my basket. “Then I won't do it again.”

His reply is so quiet, I scarcely hear it. “That isn't what I want . . . but, yes.”

I shrug and try to keep my tone light. “Don't want your jailers coming after you.”

After a pause, he says, “We need to go to the bakery.”

“What? Now?” I look around. “It's Sunday night. What would we do there?”

He releases a long breath, his eyes focused inward. “Rina cannot enter the city”—he raises one hand to forestall my question—“for reasons I don't entirely understand. And I can't enter the grounds of your stepfather's estate—the magical barrier around it would instantly detect my magic and alert the thief to my intrusion. But I can't let you walk back into your enemy's grasp alone.”

“Rina taught me how to protect my magic.” My words sound weak.

“Yes, but we don't entirely understand how your magic is being stolen. And if you are asleep when the thief attacks, your magic will be stolen to no purpose.”

My hands go to my chest as if to protect my magic. Now that I have it back, the idea of giving up even part of it is abhorrent. “So, I'm to sleep at the bakery? How does

that—”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“No, I intend to request help from a guardian who can easily slip past the magical barrier.” He offers his arm, and I take it without realizing until we’re walking along the path back toward the city center. What guard could possibly help? The bakers have magic, so they can’t sneak past any barrier either.

“A brownie?” I guess. Even as the words leave my lips, a memory pops into my head. A tiny woman smiling up at me, her dark eyes bright with affection and pride. “Wenna!”

“You remember her?” Barbaro sounds pleased. “And Othen?”

“Yes, Othen,” I murmur. He seldom interacted with me like Wenna did, but I remember his short, grizzled hair and the gap between his front teeth when he smiled, which was a rare sight. “He never talked much.”

“He still doesn’t, but he likes you. They will be delighted that you can see them again. But in answer to your question, no. Although I expect the brownies might avoid detection, they will never leave the bakery.”

“Then who?” I ask in frustration. “Miette?”

“Yes.”

I stop at an intersection of paths, dragging him to a halt. “You’re not serious. A cat?”

His smile flashes briefly. “A cat.”

Before I can question his sanity, he says, “The bakery is watched, I’m certain. I don’t yet understand quite how it’s being done, but I have sensed irregular magic around the city square, so we’ll split up here, use side streets to avoid that area, and meet at the shop’s back door. Your red cloak is difficult to see in the dark, and the ward on it prevents men from noticing you—all to our benefit.”

His urgency convinces me this is no joke. “I’ll go left.”

He nods . . . and vanishes into the shadows. Alone in the forest, I draw a quivering breath, pull my hood down over my face, and start walking. I know the paths and streets, so it’s easy enough to make my way far around the city square and arrive in the bakery’s back courtyard. I’m more relieved than surprised when Barbaro emerges from the shadows into the light of a full moon. “I’ll wait for you here,” he says. “Someone is working inside.”

“Probably Bernard, prepping for tomorrow. He supposedly lives upstairs, but everyone knows the bakery is his real home.” I unlock the door and enter the back hall, calling, “It’s me, Bernard.”

“Is anything wrong, Cerise?” He steps out of a storeroom, his face streaked with flour. “I’m just doing inventory.”

“Thank you! I nearly forgot about it this month. Nothing’s wrong. I’m just here to pick up something I need tonight. And no, it’s not a pastry.”

He chuckles. “You could stand to eat more of your pastries, petite.” Still smiling, he returns to his labor, and I head for the shop. Miette might be anywhere—for mousing purposes, she has free access to every room at night—but I find her perched atop the display case, her amber eyes bright, as if she’s been waiting for me. She lifts her chin and trills a greeting.

Only then do I notice the brownies, one of them standing on a stool beside a worktable to crack an egg into a bowl, the other removing a tray of biscotti from the big oven.

“Wenna! Othen!”

They turn to me, eyes wide, mouths dropping open. “Cerise!” Wenna cries. “You can see us!”

The tiny woman hops off the stool and runs to me. The top of her head only reaches my knee, but when I kneel to return her hug, I feel startling strength in her small arms.

“Miette already told us why you’re here tonight,” she says, smiling from ear to ear.

“How did she know?” I ask in wonder.

Wenna shrugs. “We mustn’t get behind on our work now, but in the morning we’ll be eager to hear everything! You go on now—don’t keep him waiting.” She pats my arm.

Thus dismissed, I merely smile and wave at Othen, who nods in return from his stepstool, then closes the creaky oven door, balancing the hot tray easily with one mittened hand.

Scrambling to my feet, I ask Miette, “You don’t mind coming home with me tonight? Barbaro says I need you to guard me.” I’ve always spoken to the cat as though she understands me, and now I know she does. Still, I’m surprised when she hops down, rushes to rub around my ankles, then leads the way through the main bakery room and down the hall.

“See you in the morning, Bernard,” I call in passing.

“Bright and early,” he answers in his usual way.

Since I first found Miette, a skinny, bedraggled kitten crying at this very back door, I’ve never seen her step outside. She’s never once tried to escape. But now, as I open the door, she trots through, runs straight to Barbaro, and polishes his boots with her sleek sides.

“I saw the brownies,” I tell him.

“Of course.” After an approving glance at me, he says something to Miette. She responds with one of her head-bobbing trills, then returns to me and leaps from the ground into my arms. From there, she slips around the back of my neck, under my hood. I never once feel her claws.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

I can only stand still and stare in wonder at Barbaro, whose eyes seem to light up the night. “She knows her duty.”

“Is she . . . magical?”

He shrugs. “She’s a cat.” As if that’s an answer. “I’ll follow and make certain you reach home safely. Once you’re through the gates, Miette will find her own way into the house.”

“I’ll open my window for her,” I promise.

On the way home I take an even wider circuitous route, enjoying the warm weight of Miette on my shoulders and feeling secure in the certainty that Barbaro is somewhere nearby.

This time, as I approach the mayoral mansion from a different direction, I feel magic in the perimeter fencing. Using my recovered senses, I slip into this new-yet-old way of seeing and instantly perceive the magic that twines in and around the stones and the iron posts. It seems . . . familiar. Just as I reach out to touch it, I realize why and stop. The familiar magic is, or was, mine. However, intermingled with it, anchoring it in place, is a strange . . . something. It must be magic, but it is perceptibly—where I “see” it inside my head, that is—blue. A cold, dark, sinister hue I could never have imagined. It wraps through and around the stolen magic like a parasite, feeding on my power.

All at once I realize the danger of my position. Whatever this parasitic magic is, the person or thing that controls it lets it feed on me. On my magic.

I'm reluctant to touch the gate, but it opens readily to me, as always. No magical alarms go off. On the other hand, as soon as I step inside the grounds, I keenly feel how this barrier surrounds me. Does it notify the thief every time I step through, in or out?

Miette abruptly hops off my shoulder and vanishes into the nearby shrubbery. As soon as she's gone, I feel terribly alone. In summer, the mansion has lovely gardens and gazebos and vine-draped trellises; Gisella loves to host garden parties for her society friends.

However, at this time of year the flowers have faded, and the grounds have a dismal, lonely feel. Until I step through the side door near the kitchen, I cling to the comforting thought that Miette is prowling out there somewhere and studiously ignore the fact that she's only a little tabby cat.

I've just slipped out of my pattens and hung up my cloak when my mother bursts into the passage on a wave of flowery scent. At sight of me, she heaves a deep sigh and flings her arms wide. "Where have you been, child? And don't tell me 'church.' Where were you all afternoon?"

I store my empty basket on an overhead shelf, then turn to face her wrath. "I'm sorry if you worried about me, Mama."

"Gisella," she inserts, this time without a patient smile.

"I fully intend to explain. Today, I met my grandmère DuBois."

I hear Gisella suck in a sharp breath. A fraught moment passes.

"Did I hear you say that Grand-mémé DuBois is in Chartreuse?" Charlotte's voice reaches us from the back stairs, and a moment later my sisters enter behind our

mother, crowding the already narrow hall.

Before I can answer, Suzette, my older sister, wraps me in a theatrical hug. “How marvelous, chérie! However did you end up meeting her? Did she send you a message?”

Charlotte exclaims, “You really met her? I’m so jealous! What’s she like?”

They pelt me with questions without giving me time to answer. I really can’t blame them. We’ve all three longed to meet Papa’s relatives for as long as we can remember.

“Well!” Gisella’s facial expressions change so quickly that I can’t keep track. She settles on a patient smile. “I wish you had shared the news. We might all have called upon her.”

“You want to call on her?” I blink like an idiot.

“The evil enchantress?” Charlotte adds.

“But you always said—”

“Of course!” Our mother cuts off Suzette, looking hurt and betrayed. “I would be the last person to prevent you girls from knowing your grandparents. They simply never made any effort before. Severina is here alone, is she?” She tsks, shaking her head. “Girls, we all really must visit her, poor thing. She lost her son, and possibly her husband.”

I open my mouth, ready to inform her that Gauthier DuBois is alive and well, but realize I should say as little as possible.

“Now, I don’t mean to assume he’s dead.” She heaves a sigh. “You know, sometimes marriages fall apart. The poor old woman will want to hear all about dear Gerard’s death, I’m sure, and we can take her to visit his gravestone. Is she staying at the hotel?”

“No. I met her in a quiet place outside town.”

“That would explain your dirty cloak and shoes when you came in.” Her gaze drops to my dusty slippers. “You should have already changed for dinner, but it can’t be helped now. Our guests must be introduced to you. One in particular.” She gives me a profound wink, which never bodes well. “Come along now.”

As we dutifully follow her to the parlor, Suzette says, loud enough for anyone in the mansion to hear, “Beware, Cerise: Mama’s on the matrimonial warpath. The man with the huge mustache and bland smile? She’s already earmarked him for you.”

Gisella responds in that patient tone, “Girls, I must insist that you address and speak of me as Gisella. This constant disregard for my wishes is—”

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

Charlotte rolls her eyes while our mother can't see and says, "Mama, you've got to change up your offerings if you really want to marry off Cerise. Monsieur Moustache must be the fifth baker you've brought home this year! And next time maybe look for someone under forty."

The bakery feels . . . misty . . . as I struggle to pipe filling into chouquettes that keep dodging every squirt I attempt. Am I dreaming? Chouquettes never behave this way, and . . .

Ouch!

Sharp pain, like needles in my back, drags me back into reality. Momentarily, I glimpse a hideous blue light. My soul freezes . . .

Then, a shrill scream shocks me fully awake. My eyes pop open and blink in near darkness. I hear a moan, whimpering, some hissed swearing . . . and something thuds against my chamber door.

Someone is inside my room.

"Who's there?" I roll over, sit bolt upright, and see a candle flame wave wildly as a figure with long pale hair over her shoulders gropes for the doorlatch. "Mama? What are you doing here?"

She instantly goes still, straightens to her full height, then turns to face me. Her eyes are like dark holes in her livid face. "Cerise, there's a monster in your room! I came in to check on you, and it . . . it attacked me!"

A monster?

Memories flash through my head. After that deadly dull dinner party, I remember drinking the hot milk Mama sends up every night to help me sleep. Then Miette hopped through the window and curled up at the small of my back, purring and kneading, sometimes making me wince.

Miette. She dug in her claws to wake me up . . .

I glance around the room. “Are you sure you weren’t walking in your sleep? There’s no monster in here.”

She points at my open window. “It escaped. How many times have I told you not to sleep with your windows open? Bats can fly in! Now I might catch some terrible disease . . .” Reaching one hand over her shoulder, she pulls her hair aside and briefly turns her back to me. “Is there blood?”

I see several dark spots on her dressing gown. Miette is a force to be reckoned with.

And my mother?

Ignoring the sick feeling in my gut, I feign a yawn. “A little. But whatever it was, it’s gone now. Mama, I wish you wouldn’t enter my room while I’m sleeping. It’s rude! I’m not a child anymore.”

“You will always be my child,” she says in the fawning tone I’ve always despised. In some ways she’s a kind mother, but even as a child I sensed something off in her attitude toward me.

Nevertheless, lifelong doubt grips me. Maybe I have middle-child issues: neither the oldest nor the youngest—always stuck in between. I’m not fearless and funny like

Suzette or clever and stunning like Charlotte. My sisters are the only people who see me as anything more than mediocre, garden-variety, boring Cerise.

Except . . . I'm not ordinary. I have magic. A lot of magic.

That my mother steals.

I fake a yawn, flop back down onto my pillow, and mumble, "Yep. Always. It's the middle of the night. I should be sleeping."

"Yes, you should, darling." She sounds doting, tender. "I could sit here with you until you fall asleep."

"Mama, I'm twenty, not two." I carefully keep my tone kind. "Please, go to bed. You can sleep in if you like, but I must be at work in just a few hours, and I can't sleep with you hovering."

Without another word, she steps into the hall and shuts the door hard—not quite a slam, but close enough to make her point: I stepped out of line.

She won't forget. I will hear about my disrespect sooner rather than later.

Now I know why she never allowed us girls to have locks on our doors.

With a trill, Miette appears on my windowsill. I puff a relieved sigh, grateful for her company. "You were wise to vanish," I whisper. "Thank you for waking me."

A moment later, she settles down with her nose beside my chin. Her soft purr is soothing, but I can't go back to sleep. I don't dare.

Eyes closed, I check my magic. The part I hid away is untouched. The part I left

unprotected? I can't measure exactly, but I know it's depleted. If Miette hadn't attacked when she did, it would likely be gone.

To my mother—no, to Gisella—I am a commodity to be exploited. No loving mother would steal her daughter's memories, drain her magic, and lie to cover her treachery.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

I will never call her my mother again.

Sleep is impossible. Every time I start to doze off, I think I hear Gisella sneak into the room.

When I sit up and light my candle, Miette gives a sweet little “mrrrrrr” and stretches her toes.

“I might as well get dressed,” I tell her. And once I do that, I might as well head to the bakery an hour or two early. So what if it’s the middle of the night? I’ve got my man-warding cloak—a blessing after all. Also, my lethal tabby weapon is close at hand. Last but not least, I still have my magic. For all the good that’ll do me.

I’m expert at slipping quietly out of the house before dawn, and this walk through the park feels much like any other dark morning. Except for the cat riding on my shoulders. And I’m more awake than usual, my mind running in circles.

The perimeter fence will notify Gisella that I left the property. What will she do?

I’ve just glimpsed light ahead when Miette leaps from my shoulder to the ground, and a human form emerges from the trees into my path. “Cerise, it’s me,” it whispers.

My mouth, open to scream, snaps shut. “Do you spend the night here?” I ask in a hushed tone, approaching close enough to see his face.

“I sensed your approach. What happened?”

Before I can respond, he stiffens, alert, as if cocking his ear at a noise behind him, then shakes his head at me and leans in close to whisper. “Walk to the bakery and talk to your statue like usual. I’ll meet you inside the shop.” Before I can speak, he vanishes into the darkness.

I do my best. Statues, shrubs, and benches are silhouetted against the streetlights as I cross the street to the city square. I approach the plinth and pause to rub Grandpère Christophe’s foot like usual. “Sorry to disturb you at this hour, but I couldn’t sleep so figured I’d come early and bake more pastries.” Then I cross the empty street to the bakery, pull out my key, and realize I’m shaking like a dog in a thunderstorm. I try three times before the key goes into the lock.

Once I step inside and the door clicks shut, familiar scents and sights reach my senses, and my heartrate begins to slow.

“You’re safe now, Cerise,” Barbaro says, his breath warm on my ear. Instead of startling me, his closeness floods me with memories of yesterday. I never once wonder how he got inside the shop. He’s . . . magical.

But as he steps around from behind me, I wonder how I had the courage, the audacity, to kiss this frighteningly handsome and reputedly nefarious man. I also know I would do it again, given opportunity. Probably a good thing we currently have an audience.

Miette trots across the room to greet Othen and Wenna, who are both still hard at work. Othen scarcely looks up, focused as he is on rolling a block of butter flat, but Wenna pauses with a tray of madeleines in hand to greet us. “Good morning, Cerise and Barbaro.”

“Good morning.” I glance at Barbaro. “They won’t finish for another hour or two.”

“We can talk safely here.” He nods toward Miette, who crouches in one corner of the room, her gaze fixed on something I can’t see. “She’ll let us know if trouble approaches.”

Relaxing slightly, I let him take my cloak and hang it beside his coat and hat. He then leads me to his usual table and pulls out a chair. “Coffee?”

“Yes, but I’ll make it. I know where everything—”

“No need.” He sets a cup of steaming brew before me. “The way my mother used to make it—hot and very sweet.”

Mother. He hardly knew his mother, yet he sounds fond of her.

I stare at the cup, which is thick, brightly painted, and has no handle. “If you can produce this out of thin air, why do you bother ordering coffee from me?” I ask, taking it between my hands. Its warmth is soothing. Hardly realizing what I’m doing, I sit down and breathe in the rich aroma.

He sits across from me. “I enjoy your coffee. But this”—he indicates my cup and another that just appeared in his hand—“will keep us awake and alert for hours.”

I feel my mouth curve easily into a smile, and my gaze rises from his cup to study his long nose and the thick black lashes and brows that frame his amazing eyes. Then I scan his high cheekbones, smooth brown skin, and full lips. He studies my face in turn, and I suddenly feel warm to my toes. Does he really find me attractive?

“Tell me,” he says quietly.

So I relate everything that happened to me since we parted last evening, keeping my composure until I reach the part when Miette woke me . . . and then my hands and

voice start shaking. “The blue light in my head was exactly like what I saw in the fence around the mayoral mansion. Same color, same weird sensation . . .” I shudder again. “Do you know what it is?”

“We have theories.” He gives me an apologetic look. “That magic is what first brought us here. Traces of it appear around the city, but we’ve not yet officially identified the source.”

I frown. “Whatever that magic is, tonight it was in my head while my magic was being stolen. If not for Miette, I might have lost everything again.”

He simply listens while I relate what I experienced—at least, what I can remember of it and find words to describe. “Just thinking about that light makes me feel ill and shaky. There was this sudden flash of it . . .” I frown, trying to process what I sensed. “When I woke up, it sort of slid out of my head and into something . . .” I pause. “Maybe my mother? But it wasn’t like Rina’s magic or mine.”

“Have you ever sensed your mother’s magic?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“No.” I shake my head while a strange dread comes over me. I want to change the subject, but I can’t. “I know she was in my room last night and stealing my magic, but I didn’t sense her presence in my head like I did when Rina trained me to protect my magic.” I sip my coffee, avoiding his eyes.

His forehead crinkles slightly. “Today, you and I must report what we’ve discovered to Severina.” His tone is grim. “I believe it will fill in those puzzling blanks in our theories.”

Something like panic bubbles up in me, and I glance around. “Couldn’t you tell her my story along with yours? I need to work. I should—”

“The brownies will gladly fill in for you.”

I slide a guilty glance toward the worktables and unexpectedly meet Othen’s direct gaze. “You must talk with the enchantress,” he says.

“We suffer too, Miss Cerise,” Wenna chimed in from her station at the ovens.

“You suffer? How?” I ask in a rush of outrage. “Who would dare oppress brownies?”

They stare at me, eyes wide, but say nothing. I turn back to Barbaro, but he merely holds my gaze. I know the truth: even the brownies are enspelled by this monstrous blue magic.

“I guess I could tell Bernard to have Lizzy run the shop,” I admit.

Just as the words leave my lips, Miette springs to the windowsill beside us and stares out into the darkness. Suddenly, she puffs like a furry pastry and lets out a challenging growl. Barbaro and I both stare from her to the darkness beyond the glass. I can't see a thing, but Barbaro charges toward the door.

“What did you see?” I ask, too late. The door closes behind him. The brownies stop working, and Miette prowls on the sill, growling deep in her throat.

When I try to follow Barbaro, the cat throws herself in front of me, bristling from her nose to the tip of her tail and snarling. At me. Ears flattened, back arched.

I freeze and swallow hard. “It’s just me, little girl,” I remind her. She replies with language and tones I imagine a banshee might use. Sure, she’s just a little cat, but . . .

I’m working up the courage to try to edge past her when Barbaro steps back inside. The look on his face sets my heart racing. “What? What did you see?”

He barely glances at me, vaults the counter, and pushes through the back door. I hear several male voices, including Bernard’s, raised but not angry.

I begin to feel angry myself. Why will no one but Miette, who’s not exactly articulate, talk to me?

Meanwhile, the brownies resume their work, which is somewhat reassuring. They seem to know more about what’s going on than I do. Possibly more than Barbaro knows.

“What can I do?” I ask, wringing my hands and pacing.

“Put on your cloak and pattens,” Wenna states.

“Why?”

“The weather is cold and damp.” Her tone is cheerfully matter-of-fact. “The shifter will take you to the enchantress.”

“Shifter?” I pause, struggling to think. “You mean to my grandmère?”

“She will know what to do.”

Othen gives me a solemn nod of agreement. Something evil apparently lurks outside, and I can’t help wondering if Rina has any answers worth a run through the streets in the blackest hours with something terrifying at our heels.

Still, I follow Wenna’s advice, and I’m just fastening my cloak when Barbaro returns, looking grim. After a glance at me, he nods, his expression briefly lightening. “Good girl. We must hurry.”

I watch him fling on his coat and hat. “Will we use the back door again?”

“No point in that. Be ready to run for your life if I tell you.” He ushers me outside and hurries me along the street. “We have a chance. I don’t believe it knows where Severina’s door is.”

“What is it? The thing, I mean,” I ask, afraid to look around.

“I think it’s . . .” His voice is almost a growl. “It seems impossible, but I think it’s . . .” He flashes a glance past me. “Hurry!”

I trot along at his side, still ignorant but too frightened to ask again. We frequently duck into alleys and hide in doorways so that he can check our trail, behind and ahead. We take back streets and alleys, a circuitous route to say the least. At this

hour, all is shades of darkness to me. I smell the smithy before I see it.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

We crouch in the shadows beside an old building. Beside me, Barbaro sniffs the air, listens so hard he might pull an ear muscle if that were possible, and stares holes into the darkness. At last he grips my elbow, and we leap into a run toward the office door. But instead of running straight to it, he pulls me aside into his work area, where we crouch beside the forge. At least it's a warm hiding place.

“What's wrong?” I whisper. “You're coming in with me, aren't you? You can't mean to stay behind and fight this thing!”

After a tense silence, I hear him blow out a deep breath. “I'll escort you to the cottage. But, Cerise, there's something I haven't told you.”

Hearing dread in his voice, I brace for the worst. But what could possibly be worse than what I already know?

“My mother—” His voice cracks. He swallows hard and tries again. “I . . . I inherited her magic as well as my father's.”

I give my head a little shake. “I inherited magic from both my parents too.”

“No, I—”

A sound like a smith's hammer on metal rings through the darkness. Barbaro's hand grips my arm. “It's coming. We must run. Now.”

I leap into a full sprint beside him.

Reaching the office, we skid to a stop. He opens the door, and I practically fall into the bright winter wonderland, staggering and slipping several steps. I hear him grunt with effort, and the door shuts with a solid thud. “Whew!” I puff for breath, tugging my hood closer around my face and shivering. “We’re safe now, right?”

My feet are once again clad in heavy boots, and gloves warm my hands. I take a moment to look around at the wood, able to appreciate its beauty now that I’m not alone and terrified by its strangeness.

Hearing his soft groan and quick breathing behind me, I turn around. “I assume you’ve let Severina kn—”

First, I see Barbaro’s face lengthen into a black muzzle. Then, his hands transform into paws and land in the snow, and his clothing morphs into shaggy black fur. Shock steals my voice and all thought for some time—maybe a minute, maybe longer.

The wolf stands there in the snow, head and tail lowered, ears flattened, eyes nearly shut, like a dog expecting punishment.

My heart eventually resumes its normal pace, and my brain at least partially unfreezes. After all the insanity of the past few days, what more did I expect? “I . . . well . . . That was . . .” I struggle for a description. Unexpected would be accurate but obvious. I settle on “That was something new. To me, I mean.”

The wolf sneezes and shakes itself. Thick fur ripples from its ears to its tail. Black and glossy, like Barbaro’s hair.

It is Barbaro’s hair . . . Fur.

My mouth just . . . says things: “I’m guessing this is the magic you inherited from your mother.”

Without meeting my gaze, he rolls out his tongue to pant and starts trotting along the packed-snow path ahead of me. “You’re the wolf who saved me from that horrible man in the alley,” I muse aloud, falling in behind him, my boots crunching softly. “You did come when I called. Thank you.”

He doesn’t respond. He probably can’t speak while in wolf form. That mouth wasn’t shaped to form words.

Questions rush through my head, but all of them must wait until he’s capable of answering.

As soon as the cottage comes in sight, the wolf vanishes into the woods. “I’ll see you . . . later,” I call after him, my voice trailing off as I realize I should shut my mouth and think things through.

The fact that I have romantic feelings for a man who’s also a wolf will require thorough thought. At some other time.

Rina somehow knows I’m coming. She pulls me inside and closes the door, wraps me in a warm hug, then holds me away for a deeper look. “What’s happened, Cerise?”

The concern in her voice seems to open a well of sorrows—a terrible sense of lostness floods through me. “I don’t know if I can trust anyone!”

Rina sighs, gazing deep into my heart with sorrow and . . . and a depth of love I hadn’t expected from a grandmére I met only the day before.

“My mother—” I choke up and start sobbing so hard I double over.

“Come and sit down, dear girl.” She draws me into the room, removes my cloak and gloves, and settles me in a warm armchair, all the while soothing me with gentle

words that my mind doesn't register but my soul drinks in.

Kneeling before me, she removes my boots and replaces them with knitted kitty-faced slippers that somehow make me laugh. I sound a bit hysterical, but it relieves more of the pressure.

Soon I sit with a cup of tea in my hands and a plate of my own pastries on a tiny table between our chairs. My heart still aches, but I can breathe without a hitch.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“What else is wrong, my dear?”

Although the question brings fresh tears to my eyes, I do my best to relate events of the evening before. “My sisters came for dinner, and I told everyone about my visit with you.”

Seeing Rina’s brows rise, I add, “Nothing about magic, of course.”

When she nods, I continue: “Suzette and Charlotte are longing to meet you. After dinner, while Mama was talking with other guests, we girls started sharing stories about Papa, little things we remember. Well, Charlotte doesn’t remember much, since she’s youngest, but she always drinks in our stories. Suzette says it felt like the joy and magic left our home when Papa died.”

“Did your mother hear this?” Rina’s tone and expression are neutral.

“Not that part, but earlier she wanted to know where you are staying—said we should all call on you. I just told her I met you in a quiet place outside town. Later, during the dinner, she reminded us more than once that you and Grandpère are powerful mages who’ve shown no interest in their grandchildren.” I glance up at her with an apologetic smile. “I’m sure you’ve been terribly busy—”

The look of outrage on her face silences me. “No interest in . . .!” She pops out of her chair, extends one hand before her, and mumbles something I don’t quite catch. A paper appears in her hand. She scans it quickly, then hands it to me. “I received this by mail. Ordinary, non-magical mail, that is.”

The paper feels strange in my hand. “But there’s magic here,” I observe. I first look at the signature: Gerard DuBois. My papa. But the magic isn’t his. It’s Charlotte’s. A sense of dread trickles down my spine as Rina watches me with expectation and concern.

Nothing can happen to me with her near, so I read the letter, which lists the reasons why he, Gerard, intends to cut off contact with his parents and raise his children as normal humans with no magical influences. I read the formal closing and signature, then look up at Rina. “Papa would never have written this. He loved you, and he encouraged me and Charlotte to practice our magic. He played magical games with Suzette too, and she loves those memories. Papa wrote a letter telling you that we were coming to see you and to expect us in two weeks. He—”

“We never received such a letter.” Rina’s eyes are glassy with unshed tears.

I shake my head adamantly. “I watched him write it. He was smiling and excited. And I remember exactly when he wrote that letter to you, because it was right before he . . . he died.”

But no, that isn’t right. Why can’t I remember? My head feels fuzzy and dark.

Rina asks, “How did he die?” Her voice is barely a whisper.

When I focus on that question, a terrible pain grips my head. “I can’t . . . I can’t remember. Gisella told us he died in a hunting accident, but I think something else happened.” I rub my forehead with both hands.

“Your memories are blocked,” Rina says.

“Can you find a lost memory?” I ask, peering between my fingers.

“Nose around in your memories? That’s dangerous territory. Only you can do it safely.”

“Oh. Well, I think this is jogging my memory.” I wave the letter in my hand. “This isn’t Papa’s stationery. I remember that after. . .after, Gisella burned his desk and all his things. She told us it made her too sad to see anything that reminded her of him around the house.”

Rina releases a tremulous breath. “Child, it breaks my heart that you girls went through such horror, yet today you’ve removed a terrible burden from my heart. I can hardly wait to share this news with your grandpère. As I told you yesterday, Gerard left home against our will—told us he needed to find himself. He had enough magic and guile to prevent us from finding him. Several years passed before he wrote to tell us that he was married and had three sweet little daughters—and that he was living in Chartreuse, near his father’s ancestral home.”

“He worked as a farrier in the city,” I add quietly. “I loved watching him with horses.”

A little smile touches Rina’s face. “His gifting and his joy. I wish I had understood him better, been more patient and less demanding.” She meets my gaze. “He boasted in that first letter of your magical aptitude.” She sighs. “I have always treasured that letter—the love and kindness in his words. And I cannot express the joy your lovely face now brings to my heart. I look forward to meeting your sisters.”

“They will love you too,” I state with confidence.

She drops her gaze to the letter in my hand, sets her jaw, and nods decisively. “Finish your story of last night. What happened after your sisters went home?”

“Mama tried to make me promise not to visit you again without her there to protect

me. She kept trying to touch me, but I avoided her, excused myself, and went up to my room. I checked to make sure my magic was still tucked away safely, then prepared for bed. Mama sent a servant up with warm milk, as she does every night, and—”

“Why? Why the warm milk?”

“She’s done that for years. I had trouble sleeping when I was younger—lots of nightmares.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Rina inserts, her tone dry.

I nod, grimacing a little, but continue, “Now that I must rise early each morning to prepare pastries for the shop, the warm milk helps me sleep.”

When I tell her about Miette’s timely intervention, Rina interrupts, her eyes gleaming. “I knew it! I never wanted to believe ill of your mother, but as soon as I learned of the use of illegal magic in the city of Chartreuse, I feared for you girls and volunteered for the mission. What exactly do you remember upon waking up?”

I tell her everything, and she questions me in detail about the blue flash and the similar magic entwined with my stolen magic in the perimeter fence and gates. “It was Barbaro’s idea to bring my cat home with me,” I add while Rina ponders my account of the night’s adventures.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

She nods vacantly. “He has uncanny instincts.”

Seizing the moment, I ask, “Why didn’t you tell me he’s a wolf?”

Her eyes sharply focus on me. Instead of answering my question, she asks her own: “You’ve seen him change? When?”

“Today. When he followed me here into your pocket world.”

“Oh, yes. He cannot maintain human form here. Perhaps I should adjust that spell.” But then she asks, “What happened after your mother left your bedchamber?”

Tamping down my impatience, I relate that part of the story, downplaying Barbaro’s personal attentiveness while doing justice to his remarkable skills. “Right before we ran through the door, he was trying to tell me something—”

Wait. What was that word Wenna used? I meet Rina’s gaze. “What exactly is a shifter?”

She hesitates, then says, “Barbaro says he inherited that gene from his mother. Shifters are born with the ability to switch at will from their human form to one specific animal form.” A frown flits across her face before she adds, “Of course, as a prisoner, Barbaro’s ability to shift is no longer entirely under his control.”

I need time to think this through, but something tells me my window of information is quickly closing. I must ask questions now and think later. “Do you know his real name?” I try to sound casual.

She answers with evident reluctance: “His father was Mustapha Ayad, an infamous enchanter who enslaved thousands in Khenifra and surrounding countries. The villain escaped to this continent and married an heiress.”

At my look of surprise, she nods. “Our records indicate that he did legally wed the boy’s mother; she was wealthy and connected to power before marrying him destroyed her life. I don’t know the boy’s given name. At the time we captured him, the local people called him Barbaro for his barbaric behavior. As I told you yesterday, he was the terror of the town. Of the region.”

“Boy? How old was he?”

She sighs. “His chin boasted a few straggly hairs and his voice still cracked when we captured him—I would guess fourteen. Fifteen, at most. It is nearly ten years since his capture.”

I ponder this information, my mind spinning in circles. “Is his sentence truly for life? I mean, is there no way for him to be free, ever? Even if he repents and changes?”

Emotions flicker across her face too quickly for me to identify. “The life curse is the price he pays for his crimes.”

“But he was so young!”

Two lines appear between her brows. “He killed one of our mages and badly injured two others during his capture. Countless other lives had been lost or damaged due to his thoughtless, callous abuse of magic.”

The weight on my heart deepens. “So there is no way to break this curse? Ever?”

Rina turns away. I sense her inner struggle but cannot discern the reason for it. She

heaves a quick sigh and turns back to me. “A means to break the bondage curse does exist, but Barbaro must discover it for himself.” She blinks a few times before adding, “Cerise, my dear grandchild, you must forget him. Even if he were free, he could never settle down with a wife and family. He is a wolf—his spirit is wild and fierce.”

I set my jaw. “He rescued me from a human attacker while in his wolf form. Did he tell you?”

Her brows rise slightly. “He did not.” She purses her lips in contemplation. “The bondage curse does not compel him to relate his heroic acts.”

“Well. Maybe it should.” A lump suddenly rises in my throat, and I swallow hard. “At least . . . at least I know there is some chance he could be released.”

“Dearest girl, I pray you will not waste your life on a hopeless reprobate.”

I give her a wry smile. “A lifetime of heartbreak and misery has never been high on my list of aspirations.”

The lines on her forehead fade, and she reaches out to take my hands with heartening warmth in her gaze. “Now, we must decide what to do next.” Giving my hands a final squeeze, she sits back in her chair and calls, “Barbaro, come to me.”

Almost immediately, I hear a scratch at the cottage door. Rina nods, her expression enigmatic. “You may admit him. I’ll bring more refreshments.”

As soon as Rina is out of sight, I smooth my hair, straighten my clothing, breathe deeply as I walk to the door, and then open it. Ears flattened, tail low and quivering, the wolf sneaks glances up at me, for all the world like a guilty puppy. I bend close to say, “I wish you’d told me, but it’s hardly the unforgivable sin, you know.”

From the other room, Rina calls, “Do take your human form, Barbaro. I have plenty of questions requiring answers. And Cerise, please shut the door before we all freeze.”

I step back, beckoning, and the wolf brushes past, his back high enough for my fingers to reach without bending down. His paws are huge!

I close the door and turn around just as he gives me one mournful glance, lowers his head in a sort of bow, then reverses the process I watched earlier. In a wave of magic, his black fur gives way to the clothing he wore earlier. He stands upright on human feet in scuffed boots even as his shoulders broaden, and his face and hands regain their shape. In mere moments, the handsome man I’ve come to know stands before me.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

I stare at him, struggling to readjust my grip on reality. I am currently the guest of a great enchantress (who happens to be my grandmére) in a pocket world (whatever that is), and today I have watched a man (the handsomest I've ever seen) transform into a wolf and then reverse the process. How is a person supposed to react when the unlikely is commonplace and the impossible becomes everyday life?

I figure I might as well just go with it. "Let me take your coat. You can put your boots there on the mat beside mine." He shrugs out of the coat, and I hang it on a hook beside my cloak.

Soon he stands in his damp woolen socks before the low-burning fire and raises one visibly trembling hand to rub his forehead. "Cerise, I should have told you." He resolutely lifts his golden gaze to my face. "I am unworthy of your trust in every possible way. I should never have allowed you to think . . ." He swallows hard. "I must apologize for deceiving you."

Events of the past twenty-four hours have shoved my emotional state from "moderately stable" into the "decidedly iffy" category, and if this man says one word about regretting what happened between us yesterday, I might just fall to pieces.

I did all the pursuing. I hugged and kissed him without invitation, without even asking. And now he apologizes for letting it happen? My hot blush only deepens my humiliation. What good is my magic, anyway? Well, if I focus hard, maybe I could shrink into a flea and torment his wolf form for years to come . . .

"No, Cerise, listen!"

Can he read my thoughts? When I dare to look up, his fervent gaze instantly eradicates my shame and floods my heart with hope. “Yesterday was . . . a taste of heaven.” I sense magic in his voice. “I will treasure the memory of your embrace, your kiss, until I die. My only regret is for you. Never for me.” His dark lashes sweep down to hide those burning eyes.

As if on cue, Rina returns to the room, carrying a silver tray complete with teapot, cups, and a plate of pastries that look fresh out of the oven. “No more privacy spells, Barbaro. For my granddaughter’s sake, I will let that one pass, but don’t try it again. I need you to complete this mission, but I won’t hesitate to send you back to Gauthier if you exceed your boundaries again.”

While Rina pours tea and distributes pastries, it hits me: Barbaro’s little speech was a letting-me-go spiel, not a declaration of love. I’m slow on the uptake, but I have no prior experience with gorgeous men, shifty or otherwise.

My hand trembles when I pick up my teacup, spilling a dribble into the saucer. I set it back down and shove a chouquette into my mouth. It tastes like dust and ashes. I was a fool to fall so fast and hard for a man I scarcely know. He quite possibly says these romantic things to girls at every assignment. Maybe he used a luring magic to get me to kiss him—hismodus operandi. How would I know?

While I mope, Rina gets down to business. “Cerise told me about the unusual magic her mother uses. What do you make of it?”

He takes a sip of tea, clears his throat, gives me a sidelong glance, and replies, “I believe it is fae magic. Both what Cerise described to me and what I’ve seen for myself indicate magic of a nonhuman origin that links itself with human magic. I believe the parasitic fae magic is anchored in an artifact, and the human magic, in this case, is stolen. The woman possesses no innate magic.”

My eyes go wide, but at least I keep my jaw from dropping.

Rina sits back in her chair, nodding in grim satisfaction. “I would like to know how the woman acquired the artifact, but our immediate concern is her current intentions. You’ve been observing her for some time. What is her motive? What are her goals?”

They’re talking about my mother, I have to remind myself. My mother, who is a stranger to me—no real mother at all. I feel . . . cheated. At least I’ve always had my sisters. And, for a time, we had our papa.

“My guess regarding the suspect’s motivation is a personal crusade for power and prestige.” Barbaro leans forward in his chair, his expression intent, focused. “I believe a study of her past provides our best clues to potential future actions. Since our first day in Chartreuse, I’ve tracked down and evaluated the historic usage of this then-unidentified magic.” His tone is formal, professional. “I began my investigation where I found the greatest concentration of evidence, in the city center, and gradually expanded its parameters. Most vestiges of the foreign magic are subtle, having faded over time, but a few are overt. The earliest evidence I discovered was a major event that occurred roughly twenty years ago.”

“You sound more like Gauthier every day,” Rina comments, leaning slightly forward in her chair. “What kind of event?”

“I believe it was the first of two powerful mass-memory blocks with effects covering an area nearly a mile in diameter. Its epicenter was located a few blocks west of the city square.”

“Mass-memory blocks? Two? How do you know that?”

“Based on interviews with three sets of people: those living only within the first blast’s range or the second, and those living in the overlap area. People who lived

within the first blast's range have no memory of Gisella Boulanger as a child or young adult. Older adults remember her parents, her grandparents, her brother and cousins, but they could tell me nothing about her life before she was a widow with three daughters."

My jaw drops. "Really?"

Rina nods. "Good work. And the second memory block?"

"Occurred several years later. Its epicenter was the city square—to be precise, the bronze sculpture of Cerise's ancestor. And its effect? No one within that circle remembers much of anything about Gerard DuBois."

Even as he speaks, my magic surges and a memory explodes through my brain. "I remember," I gasp, my eyes squeezed shut. "I know what happened at the statue."

After a pause, Rina asks, "Can you tell us?"

I nod, eyes squeezed shut. "Papa often took us girls for walks in the park. Well, he mostly carried Charlotte on his shoulders—she was only five. He would tell us stories about his childhood and his family history, and we always greeted the statue of Grandpère Christophe. On that day"—I look up at Rina—"the day after Papa wrote his letter, Mama joined us. I wished she hadn't come; she always spoiled things. They argued most of the way about Papa taking us to visit his parents. Mama refused to consider it, saying terrible things about you and Grandpère. When we reached the statue, Papa handed Charlotte to Suzette and asked us girls to go walk on the brick flowerbed borders like we always did. I still listened while he told Mama that he would take us and go visit you without her. That's the last thing I remember before the . . . the magic blast. Horrible blue magic."

I swallow hard. "I heard Papa cry out . . ." I rub my face and find it wet with tears.

“And then he was gone.”

My voice is calm. I act calm. I even feel calm. But beneath the calm, a storm rages. I want revenge. “She told us he was killed on a hunting trip in the mountains, and I believed her.”

My grandmère sits very still, her expression distant.

Barbaro speaks into the silence. “Monsieur LeRoy’s smithy stands at the outer edge of the second blast’s range. His memories are fuzzy, but they persist. He doesn’t believe Gerard is dead. No matter what other people say, he knows there was no funeral or service of any kind. Only a sudden gravesite and a story that doesn’t match surrounding facts.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

I spin toward him with a gasp, but no words come.

Rina, rigid with fury, mutters, “What did that woman do to my son?”

Barbaro says, “This morning, we were watched through the bakery’s front window. When I stepped outside, I heard the creak and groan of straining metal and thought I saw a large humanoid figure return to its plinth. I couldn’t believe my eyes, but Cerise’s story fills in the blanks.”

Rina swallows hard, dabs at her eyes, and tries again. “Barbaro, do you think he might still be alive . . . in there?”

He slowly nods. “From the beginning I centered my investigation around the city square because of the latent magic there. I could never pinpoint the magic’s source, but this morning ended all doubt.” Barbaro’s voice is gruffer than usual. “The statue contains entangled human and fae magic.”

When I realize the implications, my heart stills, then gives a great bound. “My papa? You really think he might be trapped inside the statue?” I croak, ready to jump at Barbaro to force an answer from him.

He studies his clenched fists. “The statue’s human magic matches the magic that powered the second blast, and it’s akin to yours, Cerise. What I don’t understand is why the magic that powered the first blast, at least twenty years ago, also reminded me of yours. It was not your father’s.”

“One of my grandparents’?” I suggest with a glance at Rina.

She shakes her head. “Gauthier hasn’t visited Chartreuse in at least forty years, and this is my first visit. The magic can’t have been ours.”

After a pause, Barbaro says, “I do have one other line of evidence. Among all of Gisella’s old neighbors, I found one who does remember her as a child.”

“Who?” I ask abruptly.

“She requested anonymity,” Barbaro says.

Rina huffs. “Doesn’t want to make an enemy of the mayor’s wife.”

Barbaro’s brows quirk. “Can you blame her? This witness lived and worked in a shop down the street from the bakery until she married and moved across the continent. Just three years ago, widowed and childless, she returned to Chartreuse to care for her aging parents. She remembers Gisella as an annoying brat who had only one little friend that she pretty much tyrannized. She thinks both girls might have worked at the bakery.”

Questions pile up in my thoughts while I listen, but Rina says, “I don’t see how Gisella’s childhood affects our investigation. Does this person recall her wedding to Gerard DuBois?”

“No. When she left Chartreuse, Gisella was still a child. As far as I can tell, no one in the city remembers their wedding, and I could find no license or record.”

Rina huffs. “No matter. We must focus now on liberating Gerard from the statue and separating that woman from the fae artifact, or whatever binds the magic to her.” She frowns, mutters something sharp under her breath, then asks, “You say the statue followed you this morning? Were you seen entering the pocket-world door?”

“I don’t believe so, but it . . .henow knows its general location.”

Rina rubs her forehead. “Only you can open the door, but he could destroy it if that monster woman ordered him to. My poor Gerard!” She pulls in her lips and bites down on them, staring at the floor. “So many holes in our knowledge, yet something must be done to free him.”

I have my own thoughts. “All those times we heard metallic clanks, grinding, or squeals, it was the statue? With my papa trapped inside?”

Barbaro nods. “It, and he, are under Gisella’s control. For obvious reasons, she can’t move it when people are around.”

“But it can see us and hear us?”

Rina speaks up. “More likely, Gisella can see and hear through the statue.”

My mother might have watched me stop and talk to that statue nearly every day for more than ten years now, since I first started working at the bakery. I bend over and rub my face with both hands. This is too much to take in. So strange . . . and yet, it all fits. Answers, at last, for the unspoken questions in the back of my mind, the emptiness in my spirit, the lost memories, and my lost magic.

I straighten in my chair and ask, “So, what do we do? Today, I mean.”

Rina’s answer is crisp and concise. “We must plan a trap.”

“A trap for what?” I don’t like the sound of this.

“For Gisella, of course. It will be risky, but I think we can manage it. She did express a desire to meet me, after all. I’ll give you one guess what she’s after.”

Surprised by my grandmère's casual tone, I blink twice. "Do you think she really believes she could steal your power?"

She gives me a sadly amused look. "Do you believe she could be content to draw on your power when she might acquire mine as well? And then Gauthier's? And why not Barbaro's? People like her are never satisfied, Cerise."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

I slump back in my chair. “She is terribly envious. Even of her children. She hated it when Papa spent time with us.”

“I do wonder how Gerard came to love and marry such a woman.” Rina sighs and rubs her forehead with two fingers.

“Undoubtedly she used magic on him,” Barbaro growls. “And when he got wise to her tricks and resisted, she removed him from the scene and wiped everyone’s inconvenient memories.” He looks at me. “You somehow managed to hold on to some special ones.”

I nod sadly. “So did my sisters.”

When Rina sits bolt upright in her chair, the fire brightens along with her. “I have an idea!” She gives Barbaro a hard look. “It will be dangerous, and we might need to change direction on the fly, but it’s worth a try.”

He nods. “You’re the boss lady.”

I’m almost certain my grandmére smiles before she can hide it.

“Do you think she knows that we know? About the statue, I mean?”

Barbaro escorts me through the city, again taking a roundabout route to the bakery, although this time there’s no ducking into doorways and alleys. The streets are busy, allowing us a kind of privacy amid the throng of busy citizens, and the statue can’t trail us in daylight hours.

“I think we need to assume the worst,” he says quietly, “as your grandmére frequently reminds me. Our plan allows for most contingencies, but there are always unknowns.”

I study his profile, the arch of his nose, the lush blackness of his lashes and brows. He is so handsome, so gifted, and yet an air of sadness permeates even his smiles. He is a prisoner with a dreadful past and a hopeless future.

I don’t know what to think or believe. The flood of revelations, the whiplash of emotions—I desperately need space to think.

But one question must be asked and answered: “Do you know of any way you can be free?”

“Free of being a shifter?” He shakes his head. “I was born this way. It is inherent, like my magic.”

“No, I mean, is there any way you can be legally freed from your life sentence?”

“I know of no other end than my death.” His voice is deep, heavy. “And not even a full pardon could remove the curse of being a beast.”

“If you inherited shifting magic from your mother, you should consider it a gift,” I point out. “You can do things ordinary people can’t do—not even mages like me. What matters is what we do with what we’re given. Will we use our gifts and our time for good or for evil?”

He guides me around a corner without touching me. “Most people don’t view my ‘gift’ that way.”

“Rina told me your surname is Ayad. Do you know your given name?”

After a pause, he says, “My mother called me Ben, short for Benoît.”

“I like that name.” So much that I can’t help smiling. “Do you know what it means? Blessed.”

When he looks at me, his expression is brighter. “I did not know. Thank you.”

“Do you prefer Benoît or Ben?”

“I like both when you say them.”

Distracted by the warmth in his voice, I trip over a crack in the walkway. Only then do I realize we are entering the park. I slip a glance his way and meet a hopeful smile.

I can’t help smiling. “It’s a perfect day. Too good to waste.” I boldly take his arm. “What will you do once we reach the bakery?”

“Further investigation. Spying. Watching over you.”

“Will you walk home with me this evening?”

“Only from a distance. Your mother will be tracking your every move. If the statue follows you, don’t react.”

“I know. Should I take Miette home with me again?”

“Yes.”

A heaviness in his voice bothers me. “Is something wrong?”

He draws and releases a long breath before answering. “I wish I could watch over you in her place.”

I lean in closer. “Sorry, but you’re too big to hide under my cloak.”

Although he smiles, his eyes hold concern. “When I was first ordered to watch and protect the DuBois’ granddaughter, it was a duty I couldn’t escape. Now, if given a choice, I would protect you for the rest of my life.”

He speaks quietly, yet I tremble at his words, at the depth of emotion they hold. “You scarcely know me,” I protest, then softly add his name, “Benoît.”

“I have spied on you, researched you, and protected you longer than you know,” he admits. “I believe I loved you even before I ordered that first éclair.” A glint of humor glows in his golden eyes, then melts into humble sincerity. “When you kissed me, I finally understood words I’d never comprehended before: Devotion. Fidelity. Love. Family. I would gladly die to save you if need be.”

I can scarcely breathe. My thoughts are so scrambled, I can’t even think.

Elation . . . and guilt rise to the surface. Elation, because this powerful, beautiful, terrifying, fascinating man actually cares about me! Guilt, because when I kissed him, it was more of an experiment, a game, for me than anything deeper. I was like a child

playing with a wondrous new toy—or, honestly, playing with fire—not a worthy young woman expressing genuine affection, let alone true love.

“Oh Ben, I don’t deserve that . . . I don’t deserve such honor from you. I’m just a thoughtless girl, who—”

He lifts one hand, and I stop talking . . . mostly because I don’t know what to say next.

“You’re neither guilty nor undeserving, Cerise. I know that your kisses did not signify love for me. I expect nothing from you. You owe me nothing. Simply knowing you, loving you, is the best thing ever to happen to me.”

I am utterly dumbfounded. I cannot comprehend the tangle of emotions roiling inside me. So I do my best to ignore them.

“I promise not to drink the milk tonight in case it’s drugged.” My tone is too bright, but I can’t seem to help it. “With Miette close to warn me if Gisella tries anything again, I’ll be safe enough. I should probably hurry to the bakery now and collect the leftover pastries before someone else takes them home. And I must make sure Lizzy can handle the shop again.”

“In the morning I’ll shadow you to the pocket-world door and open it, but then you’re on your own.”

As we near the edge of the wooded area, I feel my nerves stretch tight. “Rina won’t let anything happen to me in her world. I’m more worried about you, guarding the door. How can you fight a bronze statue with an axe?”

When he turns to face me, I let my hand slide down his arm to grip his gloved hand. He gently squeezes it. “Let your grandmére and me handle Gisella. Please.”

The urgency in his voice and eyes send my heart back into a gallop. I desperately want to kiss him again and tell him not to worry, but I don't know whether that would be kind or cruel, so I dither—and then the moment is gone. He steps back and releases my hands. “Remember that I'm near if you need me.”

One more look into those stunning eyes, then he vanishes as if he simply ceased to exist. Yet, I sense his presence still. On a whim, I say, “You remember that I'm here for you too.”

For all the good I and my magic would do a master mage like him. I can't remember the official terms for mage levels, but I know he's got to be near the top.

I hurry to the bakery to collect the pastries and my bodyguard cat.

No carriages crowd the drive on a Monday evening, and the mayoral mansion is quiet when I slip into the back hall. Savory scents drift from the kitchen, and through its open door I hear the maids chatting. Hoping to go unnoticed, I set down my basket and the cashbox, hang up my cloak, turn toward the back stairs . . . and nearly jump out of my skin.

My mother stands directly before me, her white brow creased by a heavy frown. A wave of her floral scent reaches me too late for advance warning. “Why were you not in your shop today?” she asks. I can tell she's working hard to sound pleasant.

“I visited my grandmére again.”

Her jaw clenches. “I can understand a Sunday visit, but why would you neglect your responsibilities and leave the shop in the hands of mere assistants? For all you know, they might have robbed us blind!”

My first reaction is to apologize and grovel, but tonight I sense magic cautiously

testing the edges of my mind. “Today’s takings were well within the normal range,” I say firmly. “Lizzy did a great job, and—”

“That is entirely beside the point!” Gisella snaps. “The shop is your duty. The crowds were down today. You should be there.”

“You went to the shop to check on me?” I ask.

She hastily regulates her facial expression to one of parental concern. “No, dear. Jean-Paul mentioned that you were absent when he dropped in to call on you, and no one knew where he might find you. Or so they said.”

I draw a blank. “Jean-Paul?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

Gisella rolls her eyes. “Where is your brain today, child? Your new beau, Jean-Paul Carteret!”

When understanding hits, I manage to contain my disgust and merely shake my head. “Do you mean that middle-aged man you entertained at dinner last night? He’s not my beau. Why, he must be nearly your age, Gisella.”

Her eyes go cold, and she grips my forearm tightly. “Where. Were. You.”

“As I said, I was with my grandmére. I have so many questions to ask her, so much to learn about my father and his family! We had a lovely tea—” I continue to gush even as my mother’s blue magic floods my emotions with suspicion and criticism of Rina and her motives. I furtively categorize those emotions by their origin and set them aside, then deliberately falter in my narrative and assume a puzzled frown. “I do wonder why she never made an effort to meet us before,” I muse aloud.

Gisella’s expression smooths into sympathy. “Darling, I’m sure she’s had her reasons, and I’m delighted you’re getting to know each other. You really should invite your sisters along so Severina can meet their children.” She pauses, sighs, and I feel another bombardment of fae magic. “You know, I’ve been remiss as a daughter-in-law. You told me yesterday that you met her in a little place outside of town. Can you tell me where?”

I keep my expression open and submissive. “I’m honestly not sure. She always sends a guide to lead me there and uses some magic too, I think. It was early in the morning today—still dark—and I didn’t pay attention on the way back, so I couldn’t begin to tell you how to get there.”

“Do you think you’ll be visiting again soon?”

Bells and whistles go off in my head, but I do a good job of hiding them. I don’t dare try to use my magic—she would know. “I expect she might send for me again tomorrow, but I really shouldn’t neglect the bakery again.”

A dainty shrug. “Never mind that, darling. You’ve obviously been working too hard.” She lifts the cloth in my basket and inspects the leftover pastries, tilting her head. “Tell you what. I’ll go down to the cellar and select a bottle of wine, some cheeses, a few apples, and a pretty basket.” She taps my serviceable basket. “Something much prettier than this old thing. I’ll add some of these pastries if you like, but they’re looking rather sad.”

“Are we having a picnic?” I ask, genuinely puzzled.

She gifts me with a patient smile. “No, dear. I want you to deliver it all with my good wishes to Severina, along with an invitation to dine at the manor this coming Sunday.”

I can’t help myself. “You want her to dine with us? Here?” The words sort of burst from my mouth before I can stop them.

Gisella scrunches her face, stares at the floor, and shakes her head sadly. “I know. It is time—long past time—for me to form a civil acquaintance with my former mother-in-law, my daughters’ only living grandmére. I believe . . .” She pauses, heaves a deep breath, and tries again, pushing another blue wave of emotion at me. “I believe your father would wish it. He would want good relationships among his womenfolk. So many long years have passed, but now that she’s come to our city at last, I must set aside all slights and offenses and do my best to forgive and befriend my beloved Gerard’s mother.”

I stare blankly at her, thinking fast amid her emotional bombardment. If I give in too easily, she'll suspect. "Mama, you've always called her an evil enchantress."

"Did I call her that when you told me you'd met her?"

"No," I admitted.

"See? I've grown out of resenting her so much." She takes the cashbox from me. "You go dress for dinner. It's a small party tonight, so nothing too fancy."

"All right." My voice sounds wary, but that's probably good.

My sisters make that dinner party enjoyable. Charlotte's mother-in-law kindly agreed to babysit Suzette's son as well as her own grandchild, offering both couples an evening to relax together. Watching the two happy pairs during our meal, I wonder what they would think of Benoît Ayad—I still think of him as Barbaro, but I'm practicing with his real name.

Sometime during his captivity, the wild boy he was must have been trained in the social graces, since his manners are impeccable. His clothing is rough, yet he wears it like a noble lord—at least, the way I imagine a noble lord must look. His speech and bearing remind me of Papa. Maybe my grandparents took the time to educate their prisoner?

Gisella's baker sits beside me tonight. I treat him as one of my stepfather's friends, although really, Papa Louis-Baptiste is so absent-minded that I often wonder how he manages to keep friends, let alone act as the mayor of Chartreuse. His first wife supposedly died of natural causes. Dare I hope Gisella wasn't involved? Studying him now, I detect a faint, blue-tinged aura about him. The poor man!

Who knows? The baker might also be under her control, but I suspect he's a natural

toady. I fob off his remarks with polite inanities while interacting mostly with my sisters.

I missed them terribly these past few years, yet I was so lost in Gisella's cloud of spells that I didn't recognize my loneliness. If only I could introduce them to Barbaro! Suzette's boisterous humor would amuse him, and Charlotte is kind and clever and fabulously creative even aside from her magical gift. I hardly know their husbands, but my sisters seem happy and content, which is telling.

All evening, I sense Gisella's surveillance. She doesn't attempt to magically control or influence me amid so many guests, but she sneaks glances my way, asks me leading questions, and laughs too much.

After saying polite farewells to Gisella's guests and hugging my sisters, I head upstairs and change out of my one good dress. Mama insisted on putting up my hair tonight, and it's such a relief to let it down. When Édith brings up my cup of hot milk, she chatters at me in her childish way until I almost physically escort her into the hall. "But your milk is getting cold, and I need to take the cup back down," she protests at the door.

"I promise to take it to the kitchen in the morning. Go on now. I was up extra early this morning and really need my sleep." I open the door and hold her gaze, waiting. I hate to imagine that the maids are involved in Gisella's machinations, but in all likelihood she does control them to some extent. Although I feel for the poor girl, there's no way in the world I will drink that milk tonight.

As soon as her footsteps on the stairs fade out of hearing, I open my window. Miette sits outside, looking at me. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't let you in earlier," I whisper. Why do I feel the need to explain my actions to a cat? "Please come in, girl. I really need the support tonight."

She bobs her head with a little trill and almost leaps into my room. While I quietly close the window and brush my hair, she patrols, her pink nose sniffing, her wide eyes scanning every nook. With one mighty bound into a ceiling corner, she rips down what looks like a cobweb, and shreds it with her claws. I feel a puff of magic—my magic mixed with the blue magic—and the web vanishes.

I stare from the empty place between Miette's paws to the ceiling corner, then straight into her wide eyes. "What was it?" I whisper.

Her tail twitches as if to mock my useless question. A spying device, no doubt. She trots over to rub around my ankles, gives me another affectionate trill, then hops into my bed. Purring and kneading my blankets, she settles down to sleep. I can only smile.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

To my surprise, the night passes uneventfully. Miette wakes me at my usual time by kneading my armpit. As soon as I'm on my feet, she waits at the window, gives one imperative mew, and stares until I oblige her. "Are you coming with me today?" I whisper as she disappears into predawn darkness.

Honestly, I feel lost without her. Today is the day. That is, if all goes as planned. And even our solid plans are conditional—each step dependent on the last, and alternative plans decidedly nebulous.

My mother, who never rises early, waits downstairs with an elaborately decorated basket. "This is lovely, Gisella." I lift an embroidered tea towel to see a bottle of white wine, obviously from Papa Louis-Baptiste's cellar, along with five small cheeses, several rosy apples, and a few of the better-looking pastries. "I imagine Grandmère Severina will be quite pleased."

Both of Gisella's dimples appear. "I do hope so, darling. I will tuck the dinner invitation into the side here, so don't forget it," she explains, then pats the sealed note with satisfaction. "And be careful; it's rather heavy."

I heft it easily enough. "I'll manage. Thank you for doing this, Ma—Gisella. It's . . . I'm . . . Well, just thank you." When I bend down to kiss her cheek, she grips my hand, and I feel a stab of her blue magic into the store of magic I set aside as a kind of bait or offering.

Thanks to Rina's careful instruction—and her advance warning that this would probably happen—I manage to conceal my awareness as I back away. There wasn't much magic in that store; now there is none. She stole it that quickly and completely.

“I’ll try to make it a quicker visit,” I say while opening the back door, “so I can get in a few hours of work at the bakery.”

“That’s my good girl. I’ll see you this evening. Don’t forget about the invitation.”

“I won’t.”

Miette doesn’t join me this time until I’m outside the gates. I replenish my little pocket of sacrificial magic while walking through the park—there might not be time later. Miette leaves me before I reach the city square, possibly to avoid detection through the statue’s eyes. When I greet my ancestor’s likeness with the usual pat on the foot, a wave of emotion hits me. My father might be aware of my presence. He might even feel my touch. Yet Gisella controls the statue’s every move.

Bar— I mean, Ben emerges from the shadows. Or from thin air, for all I know. “Ready?” He takes the large basket from me. “This looks new.”

I answer as we walk away. “Yes. My mother sent it. I’ve got to get back to work today, so let’s hurry.”

The streets are quiet at this early-morning hour, and I strain my ears to listen for a metallic creak, or the thud of heavy footfalls behind us. “Do you hear it?” I whisper.

“It’s back there.” His voice is a low growl. A moment later, he drags me into an alley.

There, in the darkness and stink of garbage, I try to sense the statue, or Gisella’s magic, or even my father’s. I know this adventure is dangerous. We could die or be trapped in another statue or meet any number of other fates we aren’t even aware Gisella’s fae magic can inflict. Yet beneath my nervous tension lies a deep contentment about Ben’s gentle hold on my arm. And his closeness. And his scent.

Is it possible to love someone after three days' acquaintance? Obviously, we don't know each other well. I know about his wicked, violent past, but I have never seen him angry or desperate. I don't know if he likes to dance or read or play chess or anything like that. But I do know how calmly he behaves under pressure, how clearly and concisely he can explain a complex matter, and how kind and respectful he is to everyone I've seen him interact with.

I enjoy his quick-witted humor and, best of all, I can read the kindness, patience, and compassion in his eyes. I don't know if I will ever have opportunity to know him better, but I know that I hope to.

"Let's go."

I grip his arm and follow his lead along the dark streets, around corners, and past a familiar livery stable. We're nearly there. That was too quick for me; I want more time with him.

Once again, we crouch in the darkness beside his forge. When does he ever find time to work? Does he really work here, or was that story a front? Will I ever see him again after I pass through that door? If our plan works, I might not.

On that thought, I take back the basket, set it down, and reach for his face. This time, I move my thumbs until I know where his mouth is, then lean in and kiss him. Sliding my lips over his prickly beard to his ear, I whisper, "Thank you."

"For?"

"Carrying the basket."

I sense more than hear his low chuckle. He whispers back, "Please?" So I kiss him again. If it's this amazing to kiss him while he's under a curse, what would it be like

if he could truly kiss me back?

He exhales, long and low. “The statue is holding back, hoping to see which door we use. It’s time. Remember to run like you’re worried about being seen.” To my surprise, his eyes actually do glow like burning embers.

In answer, I carefully maneuver the heavy basket out of our hiding place. With my faithful guardian at my side, I run to the door.

My role is to lead Gisella to the cottage where Rina and I together can, theoretically, overcome her. So, as soon as we reach the door, Benoît throws it open, and I stumble through, nearly upending the heavy basket. Instead of following me, he closes the door without another word.

I hate this part of the plan. To enter the pocket-world door, Gisella will need some of his power. He intends to battle the statue and lose, thereby offering his magic as bait.

He says she’ll only get part of his magic, but what if she traps him in the statue or something once she’s stolen it? Worse, what if she kills him as soon as the door is open? During our planning stage, Rina didn’t seem concerned enough by the possibility, and Ben shrugged it off. I can only hope they know something I don’t.

Which is not unlikely.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

I hurry along the packed-snow path as quickly as I can move while lugging this increasingly heavy basket. I'll feel better about everything once I'm with Rina. There's no way Gisella can stealhermagic!

My arms feel numb by the time the cabin comes in sight, and when Rina opens the door I'm more than ready to hand over the basket of bricks. "Everything going as planned?" she asks, relieving me of my burden with no visible effort.

"As far as I know," I reply and flop down in my favorite chair.

"Barbaro is watching the door?" She sits too, sets the basket on the floor between us, and lifts off the elegant tea towel.

Something in her manner restrains my tongue. "Yes. At first he thought we were followed, but I never saw anyone."

"Perhaps they were wise enough to avoid showing themselves."

I shrug, focused on the basket. "Barbaro can handle anything."

"Hmm." Seeing motion from the corner of my eye, I look up to see Rina point at the basket while staring at me with her eyebrows raised, then lay her finger over her lips.

Something is up. I nod, pretending I have a clue.

Rina carefully digs into the basket. Pulling out the wine bottle, she exclaims, "Oh my, look at this!" with exactly the right intonation. "Your mother sent all this bounty?"

How thoughtful of her! This wine is an excellent vintage.” While chatting in the same vein and commenting on my lame little answers, she removes the cheeses and the apples, followed by the leftover pastries. This done, she gives me a penetrating glance, one brow slightly arched, and glances down into the basket before asking, “Have you breakfasted yet?”

Since she obviously expects an answer, I say, “No.”

Lifting the cloth liner, she points down at a blob of red-check cloth squashed into the basket’s weave. A toy? It appears to be stuffed.

“Neither have I,” she says. “We can enjoy a pastry or two, and maybe some cheese. Would you please set a few on that platter?”

“Sure.”

“I think I’ll slice up this lovely white cheese too,” she says. “I know it would go best with the wine, but I’m hungry right now.” She points again at the gingham toy—on closer inspection I can see it’s a dog—then cups one hand around her ear as if listening. “If I were to drink wine at this hour, your grandfather would never let me forget it.”

What is she trying to communicate? I don’t dare make a mistake. “May I have another piece of cheese?” I ask, though I haven’t so much as tasted anything.

“Certainly. Help yourself.” Her tone is astoundingly casual. With equal aplomb she conjures a charcoal pencil from nowhere and writes on the sealed invitation: Magic in the toy dog. G is listening to us. When I meet her gaze, she points urgently at the toy, a somewhat frayed and faded bundle with floppy ears and embroidered features. In a flare of magic, I remember. It’s Chienne! I used to sleep with her. Really? Gisella is using my childhood snuggle toy to spy on us? How low is that?

Fine. I may be slow on the uptake, but I can pretend with the pros. “Now I need something sweet. Mama’s always telling me I need more meat on my bones, but I just can’t eat enough to get plump.”

Nodding her approval, Rina chuckles. “Be grateful. That will change as you get older.” She moans in pretend delight. “Your pastries are the best, but you already know that.”

While she has my attention, she holds up the sealed invitation.

I nod. “Oh, I nearly forgot: Did you find the invitation in the basket? Oh no, I hope I didn’t drop it on the way . . .”

“Do you mean this?” She rustles it against the basket.

“Yes! Please open it. I think you’ll be pleased.”

Rina calmly opens the invitation, reads the lying drivel aloud, and even tears up a little while talking about Gerard’s last letter and how long she has dreamed of meeting her grandchildren. And now she has great-grandchildren! I’m in awe of her acting ability.

All the while, I can’t help wondering if we’re wasting our time. Gisella might not even show up today. She might have figured out our trap, or she has plans of her own for capturing greater sources of human magic.

I’m in the middle of answering a question about my nephew, Jean-Henri, when we hear a metallic squeal, then a thud overhead. Dust trickles from the thatching, and the room seems lighter. With a sense of unreality, I twist around in my seat and see daylight pouring through a section of thatch.

Another squeal and crash, and this time I glimpse the bronze head of an axe. Dust and bits of thatching trickle down over the furniture and food. Rina drags me from my chair, pushes me toward a back door, then lets out a very convincing scream. I've barely started moving when she's back with our cloaks. I finally snap out of my stupor and run for it. While we fling on our wraps, she pins me with a look. "You know what to do, right? Let the statue come to us. Don't react until I give the signal."

Another crash, and the front section of the cottage collapses in a cloud of dust. Rina shoves me outside, and we slog through the snow in our house slippers. Where are the magical boots and gloves now? I silently grouse.

My complaints vanish when, with earth-shaking footsteps, the statue rounds the cottage and descends on us. Seeing its bronze form loom so large and blank-eyed, I let out a shriek. Rina raises her hands as if to defend herself with a blast of magic, but nothing happens. The statue scoops her up, tucking her under one bronze arm. Rina shouts commands and screams in frustration, and I can't tell whether she's still acting or something went wrong. When the statue turns to me, its blank bronze eyes briefly meet my gaze before it collects me with its other arm.

As soon as my hands grip the bronze arm, I feel Gisella's presence. Her body isn't here, but her mind and her fae magic are. Papa's magic is here, and Barbaro's is also in the mix—I sense more of his magic in the statue than mine . . . Fear for him clutches my mind, but I have no time to imagine any horrors.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“You waited too long to make your plans, old woman.” To my horror, Gisella’s voice emerges from the statue’s unmoving mouth. “I have your son’s magic and your slave’s and your granddaughter’s, and now I will add yours!”

Rina screams, and an instant later I feel that evil blue magic crash into my mind. This time I let it in as far as my sacrificial bundle. I can only hope Rina is still acting—if she is, she’s mind-blowingly good. I don’t sense Gisella’s presence, only that evil blue magic.

But this time, I know I can shove it out . . . and follow it.

The bronze arm digs into my ribcage, and I gasp for each breath, bracing my hands on the huge hand while I wait for Rina’s signal.

But the signal doesn’t come. I hear Rina’s wailing and Gisella’s triumphant laughter. All the magic I offered is gone, and the blue light begins to press for more. This is not part of the plan!

But if Gisella thinks she’s going to absorb my Rina, she’s got another think coming. Tensing my body, I let out a roar, and my magic swirls to violent life like a fiery light. It flings that blue light out of my mind and follows it into . . . where am I now?

“Cerise!”

“Papa!”

As if from a distance, I hear Gisella’s scream of shock and anger, and the blue light

dodges around as if trying to escape my magic's assault. "No!" she screeches. "You can't do this! I have your magic."

"If we join forces, we can throw her out," Papa says.

Hearing the hope and fury in his voice, I mentally shout at Gisella. "Just watch me do it! Ready, Papa? Now!"

At my command, Papa's wonderfully familiar magic charges alongside mine toward the evil blue light. Together we fling it out of the statue and follow it . . . into a roiling mass of magic more powerful than I could imagine, let alone describe. Even as I recognize Rina's sahiramagic, far too much of it to be bait, I see in its midst the blue light drawing her power into itself with rapacious greed.

How could this happen?

"Rina!" I call.

"Maman!" my father cries.

Suddenly, I sense her. "Gerard! Cerise! Help me!" I hear hope in my grandmère's voice.

We can do this—the three of us together. I call to them, "If we join forces, we can throw the fae magic out of Rina too." At least, we can if it hasn't already absorbed too much of her power.

"Don't follow it this time," Papa says. "If you do, you'll end up trapped inside the ring—along with all your magic. Do you hear me, Maman? Cerise? Stay inside Severina's mind."

Rina and I answer in unison, “Yes.”

Again I mentally shout, “Ready?”

“Ready!” they echo, gathering up their remaining magic.

“Now!”

Once more, I fling a bolt of my power at that monstrous blue light. Rina attacks with magic like an ultraviolet spear, and the silvery stream of Papa’s magic reinforces ours. But the fae magic merely throws up a shield of stolen magic—Barbaro’s?—to deflect our attack and continues to absorb the mass of magic around us, growing more powerful by the moment.

Wild thoughts fly through my head: Where are the council mages when we need them? We should have arranged for them to arrive sooner! We should have left the pocket-world door open and brought Barbaro in to fight with us! But Rina was so sure she could handle the situation with only my help . . .

Nearly frantic with fear for all of us, I dimly hear papa’s screams join Rina’s. Sudden rage sweeps through me like a building wave. Gisella—evil, selfish, hateful, controlling, thieving witch that she is—will not destroy the people who love me most!

Wait. What is that? A crackling golden flash charges into the fray, seeming to approach the blue horror from behind.

“Take her down, Cerise!”

“Benoît!”

“Now!”

I refocus on that hideous, twisting blue glow even as it magnifies like an exploding star, and I hurl my magic at it with all the fury, hatred . . . and love in my being.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“Cerise, wake up!” A hand gently pats my cheek.

“She’s stirring,” a cultured-sounding voice observes.

“Wake up, baby girl.” My other cheek gets a pat. “Papa’s here. You saved the day.”

Papa? I must be dreaming. Or maybe I’m dead? I try to open my eyes, but it’s too hard. Lying still is better. Or it would be if the ground under me weren’t so cold. I feel like a block of ice. I wonder if I might be dead but can’t seem to get too worked up about it.

Until the memories flood back. Ben! No, I can’t be dead yet! I want to spring up and look for him, but nothing cooperates. I could be dreaming all of this. After all, my mind is so fuzzy, it thinks my father is speaking to me.

“Will Maman be all right?” Papa asks. It takes me a moment to remember that his mother would be Rina.

“She’s here with us . . . and her magic seems intact. Crazy woman.” The elegant voice sounds gruff but then comments with enthusiasm, “That must have been quite the blast. Who’d have guessed one little girl had so much magic bottled up in her?”

“I guessed. Remember? I wrote to you about her.”

“I remember.” The unknown voice sounds sad, but then he adds with a hint of excitement, “Severina thinks Cerise might just take her place on the Council someday. She told me so yesterday. Says our granddaughter just needs a challenge to

bring out her possibilities.”

“Cerise met today’s challenge, all right. I do hope Maman didn’t decide to put her through that test deliberately.”

After a pause, the voice that must be my grandfather’s says, “Honestly? I wouldn’t put it past your mother to try a crazy thing like that.”

Papa sighs. “Neither would I.” A warm hand grips mine. “Her hands are like ice. I’ll get her off the ground.” Arms slide under my shoulders and legs, and I feel myself lifted gently.

So, maybe this isn’t a dream. Memories begin to click back into place: the pocket world, Rina, Gisella, the statue . . . Benoît. Where is he?

I manage to crack one eye open, squinting in the wintry light. Above me, I see a brown beard and a pink nose against a backdrop of snow-draped trees.

“Cerise?”

Hearing Rina’s worried voice nearby, I turn my head to search for her. Only an arm’s length away stands a gray-haired man wearing a fur-trimmed coat and holding my grandmère in his arms. She is terribly pale, but her eyes sparkle.

“Darling girl, you did it!” she says as clearly as if she hadn’t just regained consciousness. “Look!”

My eyes follow her pointing finger to my ancestor’s statue in its usual pose not far from my feet. At first glimpse of that bronze axe I flinch, but then I look up and meet my father’s wistful gaze for the first time in thirteen years. “Papa, you’re free,” I whisper. “Am I dreaming?”

His eyes crinkle when he smiles at me. “You’re wide awake, Cerise, and I really am free. Thanks to you, my little girl.”

Rina looks up at the man holding her and grins. “I knew it, Gauthier! Didn’t I tell you she’s asahira?”

In answer, he lifts her higher and kisses her smartly on the lips. “Indeed, you did. However, I may never forgive you for that stunt. What if you were wrong? That woman would have had all your power!”

“Yes, but it did work, and now that horrid Gisella has no power at all! Besides, I had Barbaro for backup, and he obviously performed his task—at risk of his own life, mind you.”

My grandfather smiles, shrugs lightly, and lowers her feet to the ground. “And here I thought I knew your plans. Should have known better.”

“You knew most of them.” Rina brushes snow from her cloak, then orders, “Now put your daughter down, Gerard, so your mother can hug you properly.”

Again I meet Papa’s bright-blue gaze. His jaw works, and tears fill his eyes. “Baby girl.” He hugs me close for a moment, then sets me on my feet and grips my shoulders until I’m steady. “You’ve grown into a beautiful woman. How are Suzette and Charlotte?”

“Very well, Papa.” My voice is nearly as unsteady as his.

“My turn,” Rina calls cheerily. As he turns to her, she flings herself into his arms, and I can’t help smiling at the sight of them, mother and son, together at last. “You’re so big,” she comments. “Nearly as tall as that statue.”

“It was a tight fit in there,” he says, then grins.

She smacks his broad chest. “Toad.”

Just as I open my mouth to ask about Barbaro, I feel a touch on my arm and turn to look into my grandpère’s eyes. “I know you,” I say.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

He opens his arms, and I lean into his embrace for the first time. He smells of pipe tobacco and peppermint, just as a Grandpère should. “Cerise, our little girl.” Do I hear tears in that posh voice?

“Sir! Monsieur DuBois!”

We turn to see a young man approach at a run, slipping and sliding on the path, his gray cape sweeping behind him.

At sight of him, fear rushes through me. Where is Benoît?

The man slides to a stop and salutes. “I’m here to report.”

Gauthier DuBois is all business again. “What is it, Alonso?”

“Two things, sir,” he gasps. “We found the shifter convict.”

“Where?” I blurt, scarcely aware of the startled gazes flashing my way.

“Um, not far from the portal door. We also found the woman . . .”

But I’m already running full tilt. Right past the statue. Still in my slippers, which live up to their name—I slip and fall twice on the packed-snow path that seems ten times as long as before. As I round the last curve, I see three people looking down at something.

As I approach, they whirl to face me, revealing a crumpled body on the ground. One

look tells me it's Gisella, but I don't care about her. Beside a blood-spattered trail leading toward the forest I see a severed finger pointing down into a drift. A gold ring with a cloudy stone encircles its bloody stump.

I stick to the trail into the forest until it ends, then visually follow its trajectory to a bundle of black fur at the base of a pine, where the blast of magic threw him. After slogging through the deep snow at least another twenty paces and losing one of those stupid slippers, I finally drop to my knees at his side. I know he's alive: he breathes in shallow huffs. He looks almost flat, lying on his side in the snow, his long tongue flowing like a pink ribbon from his open mouth. Dark blood smears his jaws and razor teeth.

"Oh, Ben, what have you done?" I wrap my arms around his body. I try to enter his mind and offer support in whatever battle he wages, but something like a wall blocks me. My hands move to gently stroke his soft ears and the thick ruff around his neck. "Wake up, Benoît Ayad!" His legs twitch, he whines softly, and I feel the throb of his racing heart.

Residual blue magic permeates his fur, the snow, the trees around us, and even the ground beneath us. But the magic is dead, so what inner battle is he fighting?

Suddenly, the wolf releases an agonized howl, and magic blasts from within him.

Moments later, while staring at the sky from flat on my back in the snow, I analyze that blast. It was not fae magic. Neither was it Ben's magic. My inexpert analysis concludes it was a potent blend of human magics formed into a spell of some kind. A curse?

I struggle upright only to see the wolf's body begin to writhe and thrash. Will his suffering never end? "Ben!" While scrambling back to his side, I realize he's transforming. Once again I watch as the long muzzle retracts, the black fur recedes

and changes into clothing and hair, and the body warps and refigures itself into a grimacing human shape, gray and bloody in the face, lying on its side in the snow with its back to the tree.

Eyes still squeezed shut, he shakes his head slowly as if in denial, lifts a tremulous hand to his mouth, then squints at the red smears on his fingers. “Whoa, that was a mistake. Have I got any teeth left?”

I’m trembling with joy, but I do strive to maintain control of myself. “If it’s a mistake to save the world from an insanely evil dictator powered by fae magic, then you really blew it today,” I say, gently smoothing loose hair from his cheek.

His golden eyes fly open, then close in a wince at the bright snow and sky. “Cerise! You’re . . . all right?” The relief and joy in his voice fill my heart.

“I’m fine, thanks to you. Everything went according to plan. Rina’s plan, that is. And your teeth are intact. Not sure about the rest of you. What happened?”

He works his way to a sitting position and leans back against the tree, looking utterly exhausted. “Where’s Gisella?”

I point. “That way. On the path. I believe she’s dead. My father is alive and freed from the statue, and my grandfather is here—”

“About time Gauthier got here. Great news about your father.” Then he blinks twice. “Dead? I heard her scream . . .”

“That was when your magic struck like a lightning bolt and helped mine destroy the fae magic.”

“Lightning bolt, eh?” Amusement brightens his expression. “I like it.” Then he

sobers. “I charged in to bite the fae ring off her finger. She screamed, and I ran for it . . . and there was a magic blast or explosion.”

“There sure was. You saved us all.”

“I didn’t know losing the ring would kill her—your mother.” His voice holds regret I didn’t expect.

“None of us knew. You followed orders, and your actions very likely saved other people from injury and even death.”

He nods doubtfully. “She stole most of my magic, but she didn’t kill me when she had the opportunity.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

My jaw drops. “You mean, you chased after her with no magic to fight with?”

“I had my shifter magic. Somehow she didn’t sense that, so my pursuit took her by surprise.”

I give his arm a squeeze. “I know you feel bad, and maybe I’m an unnatural daughter, but right now I only feel relief that she can’t prey on any of us ever again. We all worked as a team, and Chartreuse is a safer city now.”

He looks pensive. “I played my part in the plan, and you played yours. Now I’ve must get debriefed and wrap up any loose ends.”

“Wait a minute.” I lean my shoulder against the tree beside him and press my hand over his heart. “First we need to talk about us. I’ve been thinking: If I can talk my grandparents into taking me on as a recruit to serve the Magic Council, we could be together at least part of the time.”

When tears shimmer in his eyes, my heart turns over. “Benoît? What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that I can offer you nothing. I have no agency in my own life.” His voice sounds rough. “And you first spoke to me, what, five days ago? You don’t even know me.”

“I know you well enough. We’ve been through a lot during those days, and I believe you are a man I can trust. A man I could spend a lifetime with and never regret my choice.”

He stares into my eyes until the world seems to fade around us. “The first time I saw you, I knew I was in trouble,” he murmurs. “And the trouble has only grown stronger and more . . . more wonderful. I know exactly what it is: love.”

I suck in a sharp breath. The pain in my chest is terrible and delightful.

He continues, “I never loved anyone or anything more than myself, Cerise—until I met you. I would do anything for you, give up everything for you.” He smiles sadly. “I would settle down and become a family man and treasure every moment. I could sweep out the bakery and maybe learn to make éclairs with you each morning. And every day would be a delight, a gift.”

This feels like a perfect dream that will vanish even from memory when I wake. I might as well make it a dream worth living. I sit up straighter and grasp his bristly cheeks between my hands.

“Cerise—” Before he can say another word, I kiss him. After a moment of hesitation, he kisses me back, and I feel one of his gloved thumbs rub my wrist. No magic repercussion zaps him, so I lean in closer for more kisses, and he cautiously lifts one hand to my shoulder.

I’m not sure exactly how it happens, but soon I am crushed against his chest, and now he initiates the kissing, tipping his head and mine until our lips mesh more perfectly. His gloves are gone, and his surprisingly warm fingers gently caress my face and thread through my damp, tangled hair.

Dimly, in the back of my mind, I realize that we have responsibilities to face. People are waiting . . . and my backside and feet are freezing from sitting in a snowbank. None of that matters—the joy in my heart eclipses all else. But then Benoît slowly pulls back until he can look into my eyes. Fiery gold rings surround his dilated pupils. “No ward, no fae spell could ever hide your beauty and fire from me. I would give

you everything . . .” He pauses, and the flames fade. “Yet I have nothing. I own nothing—not even myself.”

“We can make it work, Ben,” I say quietly. “I believe we will.” I shake my head, smiling a little. “Just now you held me and kissed me, and nothing happened to you. What if . . . what if that last burst of magic was the captivity spells breaking? What if somehow, some way, you triggered the one thing that could end your lifetime sentence?”

I watch a succession of emotions flicker through his expressive eyes. Bright hope and excitement . . . quickly followed by resignation. “I can’t even hope for that, Cerise. If my shackles did break when I destroyed the ring, they will be replaced.” His fingers trail down my cheek. I recognize that look of renunciation, but I’m not about to accept it.

Reaching for my future with everything in me, I say, “I love you, Benoît Ayad. Life is never easy, and no future is guaranteed. I’ll be a prisoner along with you if that’s what it takes. I’m no stranger to hard work. And nothing important in life is easy. We have to choose love and duty every day to make it work.”

He listens. He ponders. When he finally nods, his eyes glint with determination. Rising with no evidence of stiffness or pain, he pulls me to my feet. “Let’s go report to the Council. Together.”

“Well spoken, young man.” I hear my grandpère’s voice even as the world changes around us. Clutching Ben’s arm, I close my eyes. When I open them, we stand in a round chamber packed with well-dressed, dignified people seated in stepped rows of carved wooden seats. One of them is Rina, who wears a lovely lavender gown. She gives me a secretive, self-satisfied smile.

What happened to the pocket world?

While I stand and stare, Benoît bows in respect. “My lord. My lady.” He also nods to our seated audience. Apparently he’s used to being picked up and moved around like a game piece.

“Benoît Ayad, formerly known as Barbaro, that last wave of magic was the final dispersion of your lifetime-service curse. I apologize for not arriving in time to warn you before it struck. I don’t imagine it was a pleasant experience.”

Ben stammers, “I-I don’t understand.”

My heart feels like it’s exploding. “You’re free, Ben!” I cry, flinging my arms around his neck. “You’re not a prisoner anymore!” I then burst into tears, but no one, least of all Benoît, seems to mind my complete loss of composure.

“It has been a process,” Grandpère says, his voice formal and authoritative. I step aside, mop my face, and try to listen and behave like a lady, but Ben keeps hold of my hand. “During the past few years, the prisoner known as Barbaro has demonstrated reliability, resolve, respect for authority, and ingenuity while serving the council with increasing autonomy. In the course of this latest assignment he worked almost entirely alone to solve a complex mystery involving historical research along with magical forensics. He proved himself trustworthy and honorable while in sole charge of a girl for whom he harbored romantic feelings.”

My face went hot. How much did my grandparents—and the entire council—know about those kisses in the park?

“And today, he freely risked his life to save not only her but our entire party. In doing so, he sustained our world’s current magical community along with generations to come. Everyone at the scene, along with many of you across the world, sensed the magical chaos when he violently separated the vile ring from its host, dispersing the stolen magic as well as the fae magic in one burst. This selfless heroic action

completed the dissolution of his life sentence and the magical fetters he bore for more than ten years.”

Rina nearly bounces in her seat. “And that’s not all,” she blurts.

Grandpère Gauthier gives her an indulgent smile. “A moment more, petite,” he says, and she sits back in her seat, lips compressed but eyes alight.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:47 am

“For months now, we have anticipated this event, and today I have the honor of asking you, Benoît Ayad,sahir, to consider continuing your outstanding work for the Magic Council as part of our crime-fighting team.” When Ben is silent, he adds, “Professionally. For pay.”

My grandfather just officially acknowledged Ben as asahir, the highest rank among human mages. Almost breathless with delight, I squeeze his arm. “Will you do it?”

He turns to me, his expression dazed yet hopeful. “Do you think I should?” His voice is nearly a whisper.

“I think you’re a marvelous investigator and hero. But do you enjoy it? I mean, would you rather set up as a farrier? I bet you and my papa could work together.”

While we talk, I hear other mages conferring quietly, and then Rina speaks up. “Before you decide, I have another request to make. Of our granddaughter, Cerise DuBois.”

Startled, I nod.

The words seem to surge from her lips. “We wish to invite you, Cerise, to accept official magic training here at Council headquarters. I was deeply impressed with your progress after a few short lessons, and today you surpassed even my wildest hopes.”

“You set me up,” I accuse her, trying to scowl. “I thought you were in danger.”

“She could have been,” Grandpère grumbles, giving his wife a chiding frown.

I hear a murmur from the crowd, but Rina rolls her eyes. “I knew what I was doing. And Cerise, after that demonstration of power today, your grandpère and I are of the opinion that your magic is near, if not at, *sahiralevel*.”

Somehow, I manage to feel both numb and ecstatic. “Once I have training, could I join the crime-fighting team too? I mean, solve magical mysteries and arrest magical villains?” I feel a warm hand wrap around mine as I speak.

My grandparents nod, smiling. “We were hoping you might ask.”

“Hourra!” I shout just as Ben picks me up and spins me around.

Several months have passed since we defeated Gisella and her fae ring—days and weeks packed with explanations, reunions, smiles (my facial muscles are developing), some tears, and a great deal of confusion. Can any family, any life, be more tangled and confusing than mine? It’s one crazy story.

Hmm. Where shall I begin? I guess I’ll jump into the middle and work my way to the edges. First, the technical stuff.

When Ben bit the ring off Gisella’s hand, he severed the blue magic’s connection with the human world. Loss of its anchor destroyed the fae magic as well as the ring, which instantly released all its stolen magic. The sudden surge of imploding magic killed Gisella.

We still don’t know how and when she acquired a fae ring. That investigation is ongoing.

A quick pause here while I gloat: After enduring Rina’s warnings about Barbaro and how he shouldn’t be trusted, I can’t begin to describe the pleasure I now take in

hearing her boast to various people, “We saw it coming for several years but couldn’t tell a soul. It was dreadfully difficult to keep to myself! Yes, the boy was a reprobate criminal back then, but he’s a man now, and a changed one. His selfless, honorable service and commitment to excellence finally earned him his freedom. We’re proud to have him in the family.”

Ben regained complete control over his shifting andsahirmagics and is now a full-time crime-fighting operative, and I’m . . . well, I’m learning. Both magic and investigative stuff. The transition from pastry baking to crime fighting is even harder than it sounds, especially since I’m simultaneously learning how to use my magic. Then again, a baker learns to follow directions and pay close attention to detail, skills that come in handy in my new line of work.

I’m also learning to accept earth-shattering news with creditable calm. First, I learned that Gisella was not my mother. Suzette and Charlotte are her daughters, but I am not. Papa isn’t blood-related to them either.

When Barbaro spoke to a witness who knew Gisella as a child, the woman mentioned a girl that Gisella bossed around. As they grew older, both girls worked in the bakery. Now I know that the friend, Bernadette, is the daughter of Bernard, my head baker. Furthermore, Bernadette is my father’s wife andmy real mother. Not only do I now have a mother I can love, but it turns out I’ve been working with my grandfather, uncles, and cousins all these years. “Happy” is an inadequate word to describe how I feel about all this, but it’s a beginning.

Other than my father, no man, woman, or child in Chartreuse remembered my real mother’s existence for twenty years, thanks to Gisella. As soon as I was born, Gisella, who had “kindly” served as midwife, stole Bernadette’s magic and mine using the fae ring, then trapped her in the little stuffed dog she’d sewn for me and wiped her existence from the memory of every human in the area. Only Papa dimly remembered his beloved Bernadette in the back of his mind, but he believed she’d died in childbirth. Gisella, who had earlier disposed of her inconvenient first husband,

pushed Gerard to marry her so their daughters could grow up in a family. Dazed, brokenhearted, and enspelled, he gave in to her demand but insisted on an in-name-only marriage.

In the years that followed, he loved Suzette as dearly as he loved me, and he even took Gisella's illegitimate daughter, Charlotte, into his heart. Gisella freely parasitized his magic until, in time, he fought off her spell enough to become concerned about my future and seek out his parents. Refusing to lose her main sources of human magic, she then trapped him in the statue to keep his magic handy, convinced the locals of his death, and did her best to make us girls forget him. It didn't work. My ancestor's statue served as a constant reminder. Gisella simply had to deal with our sorrow and our continued devotion to our papa. And all those years, my parents were imprisoned, neither knowing what became of the other.

They both believed the worst up until the ring was destroyed, Gisella died, and Bernadette emerged, pale, dusty, and disheveled, from the ruins of Rina's cottage to find her husband and his parents standing out in the snow beside the bronze statue. I wish I could have witnessed that reunion. Rina did, and she still tears up when she talks about it.

I can't imagine a more beautifully tragic romance. Twenty years they were apart—they're both around forty years old—yet they love each other like newlyweds. For the present, Papa has returned to the smithy to work with Monsieur LeRoy, who was delighted to have him back, and Bernadette replaced me at the bakery, working with her father and brothers, meeting their families, and reuniting with Wenna and Othen, who'd remembered but been unable to speak of her all those years.

Suzette and Charlotte were more relieved than saddened by Gisella's death. They'd had their fed of their manipulative mother long ago and only attended her parties to be with me. Without attempting to explain the craziness to anyone else, they have adopted Gerard and Bernadette as grandparents for their growing broods, and everyone is happy.

Our former stepfather, the mayor, apparently has only dim memories of his second wife, and his real children were thrilled to be rid of her. None of them have attempted to contact us.

I was quite surprised to learn that Grandpère Gauthier DuBois is a vicomte. Which makes my father a lord of some kind as well. He doesn't particularly care about the title and duties involved, but the family property lights up his eyes. The historic DuBois estate, Château Magique, lurks on the outskirts of Chartreuse, maintained by a host of brownies and dwarves. Papa hopes to raise horses there, which would make it even more delightful. Ben, Miette, and I visit whenever we have time to relax for a few days. My parents—I do enjoy using that word now—live there and manage the place, magically commuting to their city jobs. Sometime next year I will have a baby brother or sister.

Interesting to ponder that my baby sibling might grow up alongside my children. Not that we're in a rush. I should have mentioned earlier that I married Benoît five months ago. Many people would say marrying after a mere three weeks' acquaintance was unwise, but we have no regrets. We've shared so many formative life experiences—for example: megalomaniacal family members, complex curses, nighttime strolls in the park, battles against hideous blue fae magic—that we know each other better than many couples who courted for years.

As for the statue of Christophe DuBois, it once again stands proudly in the city center. My sisters' children are being trained to keep its bronze boots shiny. I imagine my offspring will join them someday. Family traditions are important, after all.

Miette enjoyed her part in fighting magical crime so much that she forsook her duties at the bakery to travel the world with us. That cat does love adventure. Benoît recently told me she hopes we'll someday give her a litter of wolf cubs to raise and train. I nearly passed out in horror before he assured me it doesn't work that way, then laughed himself silly.

When I'm not tempted to throttle my husband, I enjoy his sense of humor, and I still bake éclairs and chouquettes for him on occasion. Crime-fighters, parents, or whatever else we become in the future, we will always be the Baker and the Wolf.

The End