

CHAPTER TWO

“That is not possible,” Regina contradicted with a firm shake of her head.

“I fear it’s not only possible, but a fact. I felt the woman’s powers just now, and she’s quite strong, both in mind and spirit. And the moment she realized I had connected with her, she jerked back from my presence quicker than a rabbit escaping a fox.”

“Do you know which one it is?”

Dominic merely arched a brow. “Since I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting any of these paragons of virtue, that would be rather difficult for me to ascertain, would it not?”

“Do you believe she’s here to cause trouble?”

“That’s exactly what I intend to find out. Invite all the young ladies to join me for dinner, and I’ll create a test to see if we can expose our wolf hiding among the sheep.”

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The summons to dinner was neither unexpected nor desired. Serena told the women that whatever they did, they should not show their fear. She worried about Susan and Allison the most. Neither was particularly strong nor adept at hiding their feelings. She coached them as best she could, then each left to get changed. Dinner, they were informed, was a formal affair, and they were expected to dress accordingly.

They descended the stairs in single file and in alphabetical order, as they had been instructed. Serena wanted to change places with Allison to protect her, but Allison was afraid they’d be discovered and feared what might happen as a result. Serena worried more for Allison than herself, but if following the rules kept her cousin from fretting, she wouldn’t insist.

The Master of Ravenswood, dressed in formal evening attire, stood from his seat at the head of the table as they entered. He may have manners and style, but that didn’t make him any less of a demon in Serena’s mind. Mrs. Sloan asked them to remain in alphabetical order and stand behind the chairs beginning at Mr. Westcroft’s left. Once they were in position and Mrs. Sloan had taken her leave, Dominic Westcroft gave a nod and their chairs drew back from the table as if unseen servants had politely pulled them back for the ladies to sit. Several of the women gasped, but no one moved. Serena’s heart sank as she realized he had sensed her abilities when their essences melded, and now he intended to use his magic as a means of forcing her to disclose herself.

Katherine Shaw was the first to regain her composure. Gracefully drawing back her wine red velvet skirt, she took her seat and actually smiled at the man and thanked him.

Dominic Westcroft’s eyes took on a predatory gleam as he regarded her. Following Katherine’s lead, Serena took her seat as well. She wasn’t sure what order the others followed since all her concentration was focused on holding her flighty napkin still on her lap. Glancing up she noticed Dorothy struggling to keep her silverware flat on the table, Frances tugging to keep her napkin from covering her face and Melissa gripping tightly to hers to keep it from tucking into her lace-frilled bosom. Only Susan and Allison appeared to be untouched by their host’s pranks, and both of them looked as if they’d faint if anything moved on them.

From the slight curve of his lips, Serena suspected Westcroft was only dallying with them, and she dreaded what would happen when his efforts turned earnest.

The table linens promptly ceased misbehaving when the servants filed back into the room carrying the first course. A soup. The master of Ravenswood directed the servants to place an empty bowl before each guest, set the tureen on the table, then leave. Serena had a sinking feeling she knew why he gave that order and prayed she was mistaken.

“It’s mock turtle soup, ladies. I hope you enjoy it,” the Wizard of the West murmured in his rich baritone voice.

The tureen, designed to look like a deeply set oyster shell, rose up on its large turtle-like, stubby china legs and “walked” about the table, serving out a ladle of soup to each of them. A few of the women drew back in alarm while Caitlyn, Katherine and Georgina appeared to be charmingly amused by the china’s antics. Serena could see Allison struggling to master her own fear, so she wasn’t the least bit amused by their host’s game-playing. However, if he continued grandstanding in this manner, it might not be as difficult to expose him as she’d originally thought. He was certainly making no effort to disguise his magical talents, so all she had to do was keep silent and wait.

When everyone had been served, Serena observed the way Allison, Susan and Melissa stared at their bowls with grave suspicion. Not wanting to draw attention to herself by being the first, Serena waited to see who would be brave enough to take the first sip. Katherine took the lead again by picking up her spoon and taking a delicate taste of the steamy, thick broth. With a delighted smile directed specifically at their host, she proclaimed the soup quite delicious. When the bowl didn’t spit the thick liquid back into Katherine’s face, Serena, taking her cue from the others, picked up her spoon and followed suit.

As they ate, the master of Ravenswood turned to the woman who sat at his right. Grateful Westcroft’s attention was focused on someone other than she or Allison, Serena was relieved that Allison sat at least a few places down from their host, although she would rather have had her cousin sit where she did, all the way at the end of the table, instead of directly on her right. Being first in their alphabetical lineup, Susan Baker had the misfortune of sitting on Westcroft’s left. Susan was shaking so badly that Serena was surprised the silver spoon wasn’t clattering against her teeth. Yet Westcroft appeared to practically ignore Susan for the tasty morsel on his right, who regarded him with undisguised interest.

“And what is your name, my dear?” he inquired with a smile. From that small turn of his upper lip, Serena had no doubt that Dominic Westcroft could be a devastating charmer if he chose to be. However, even from her distance she could see the man was merely toying with the woman beside him, much as a cat played with a mouse just before it pounced.

Katherine smiled and leaned even closer to him in a blatant display of showing off her two most prominent assets. She believed the man was infatuated with her. He wasn’t. He was no doubt interested in discovering if she was the one he’d connected with, but he clearly wasn’t smitten.

“Katherine Shaw, sir. I was most impressed by your display this evening, Mr. Westcroft.”

“Were you, my dear?” He leaned forward slightly as though intrigued by the woman and her conversation. “And what impressed you most, Katherine?” he inquired, deliberately making his inquiry more intimate with the use of her first name.

“Oh, the soup, most definitely. What a clever way to serve a meal. You must be very powerful indeed, sir, to perform such creative magic so easily,” she suggested, leaning even closer to him.

“Ah, a fellow admirer of the magical arts. Tell me, my dear, have you any talents of your own that you’d like to tell me about?”

Katherine actually blushed. “None that could equal yours, sir, though they do say I have an uncanny way of reading others’ thoughts.”

“Really?” His interest appeared to fade slightly as if he knew the woman spoke falsely in the hopes of capturing his interest. He leaned back in his chair. “Can you tell me what I am thinking now, my dear?” he inquired evenly.

Serena didn’t find that too difficult. He believed Katherine Shaw to be a liar and a flirt.

A small furrow appeared on Katherine’s brow as she regarded him closely. “I would say that you are wondering what other talents I might possess, sir,” she offered suggestively.

It took all of Serena’s control to keep from choking on her soup at the woman’s delusions of her allure.

When Westcroft’s piercing gaze suddenly shifted to her, Serena quickly bent her head and coughed delicately into her napkin to cover her slip.

Katherine sent a quick scowl of displeasure Serena’s way before she turned back to Westcroft with a honey-sweet smile pasted on her lips. “In truth, sir, I have little abilities of my own, but I am most fascinated by yours.”

Dismissing her with a bland smile, he glanced about the table at each of the women before he replied, “I’m pleased to hear it. Wait until you see what I have planned for the main course.”

As if on command the servants entered and removed the soup tureen and the bowls. Next, they carried in a large silver-domed platter. Closing her eyes, Serena mentally groaned in dread of what his next feat of sorcery would bring. Once again, after the servants had placed a new setting before each of the women, Westcroft dismissed them with a wave of his hand. Serena opened her eyes just in time to see the domed cover lift itself off the platter and float over to a sideboard. Getting used to his displays of magical grandstanding, a few of the women sighed a collective “oh” at the succulent, well-basted and delicately seasoned goose seated prominently on a bed of roasted potatoes and carrots.

Next the knife and fork rose up from the table and crossed each other in a sort of salute. Then they turned and lowered their well-honed edges toward the bird, but the golden-brown goose got up on its sturdy hind legs and began to flap its crispy little wings as it attempted to escape being carved into serving bits.

The women’s delight quickly turned to dismay as the knife and fork began hacking at the bird despite its valiant effort to flee without flying. Allison and Susan both covered their heads with their gold-rimmed plates and ducked under the table, Melissa and Serena both rose and took a step back. Dorothy fainted, Georgina screamed while Frances and Caitlyn actually tried to catch the “running” bird. The fork stabbed at Caitlyn’s fingers while the knife took swipes at Frances’s hand. Then the hot, minted peas began flinging themselves at Katherine. When she screamed, both Allison and Susan started to cry.

Unable to ignore her cousin's distress any longer, Serena glared at the man who watched them all like a hungry cat. "That's enough! You've made your point quite clearly. Now leave them alone," she commanded, knowing full well she was giving him exactly what he wanted, but her conscience wouldn't permit her to do otherwise.

The chaos came to an abrupt end. The bird returned to its serving platter, the cutlery fell harmlessly to the table and the vegetables lay inert as normal vegetables were wont to do.

Dominic Westcroft rose. "So, our little sorceress reveals herself at last. I wondered what it would take to get you to step forward."

"You're mad," Serena countered, knowing it wasn't wise to rile a person who'd lost all semblance of reason, but unable to think of anything else to say in response to his accusation.

"Not quite yet, my dear. Though I've been assured that the journey isn't a long one for me." Then he raised his hands and shot a bolt of energy that knocked Serena back into her chair and momentarily robbed her of breath. The sensation was similar to a hard shove. Not painful exactly, but by no means gentle either.

The women, who had remained conscious, including Katherine, all scrambled to get away from him. They collectively ran to the doors leading to the hallway only to discover the wooden portals were locked. Like Serena, they were trapped in the room with the Wizard of the West.

"What, no response?" he queried Serena mockingly. "Surely you can do better than hiss at me like an enraged kitten."

"I'm not a sorceress," she murmured between gritted teeth. "Though you clearly are a bastard."

"Tut, tut," he muttered. "My father might never have married my mother, but that's no cause to begin flinging paternal insults now, is it?"

Serena didn't answer. She'd meant the insult figuratively, not literally, but she felt slightly ashamed of herself. It wasn't like her to swear, and resorting to name-calling really was beneath her.

He moved his hands in a gesture that appeared almost graceful, and Serena was lifted above her chair, still in a seated position. It was as if she sat on an invisible shelf. She felt securely held, though there was nothing but air beneath her. She kept her hands in her lap and her eyes on him. If he dropped her from a height greater than where she was now, he could hurt her. When she said nothing, he raised her up another foot.

"Still no response? Somehow, I expected more from you, my dear. After all, we have so much in common, do we not?"

All of Serena's blood ran to her feet. How could he know? Surely he hadn't discovered her true identity when he'd briefly probed her mind. No one here, outside of her cousin, should have known who she really was, and her real name wasn't on any of the paperwork.

"Ah, I see that finally got your attention," he crowed, raising her up another foot.

"I have no idea what you mean," she replied with as innocent an expression as she could muster sitting at least ten feet off the floor. Another ten feet and her head would be brushing the ceiling.

"Ah, but I think you do," he replied, raising her up another foot. "Your pallor gives you away."

“If my color is drained, sir, it is most likely due to the heights in which you have placed me, not because I have garnered any secret meaning to your words.”

“So you say,” he murmured thoughtfully, as she was lifted one more foot. “But I felt your powers when you reached out to mine. Thus I know what you are, and no protests of innocence from those lovely lips will sway me otherwise.”

Her fear of discovery eased slightly with his admission, but she kept her expression neutrally blank. “Then I have nothing left to say to you, sir. If you intend to raise me to the ceiling then dash me to the floor, I pray you get on with it quickly. I’m beginning to feel quite lightheaded up here and the screams from below aren’t helping to ease my headache.”

He regarded her intently for a moment, and then lowered her back to her seat. He bowed to her. “It would appear that I must yield this round to you, my lady. You called my bluff, and won. But don’t think this means we are through, for we are not.”

He turned to the other women, and yelled, “Cease and desist! Your caterwauling is most unpleasant, and as you can see no one was harmed, so there is no cause for it to continue.”

The women became silent almost immediately, except for a few snuffles. Assuming the lead, Caitlyn stepped forward. “Please, sir, we’d like to leave.”

Giving his hand a distracted wave, he released his hold on the doors. “Then by all means scurry off to your rooms, don’t let me hold you back.”

Caitlyn shook her head. “No, sir. I mean we would like to leave the manor.”

“You would, would you? Do all of you feel that way?” Allison, Susan and Dorothy, who’d finally regained consciousness after her swoon, all nodded, but the others seemed more uncertain. “It is late,” he concurred almost gently. “I suggest you all retire for the night, and if you still feel so inclined in the morning, we will make arrangements to see you safely returned to your loving families.”

Amazingly, all the women except Serena nodded. There wasn’t even a moment’s hesitation from any of them. The doors opened. “Ah, Mrs. Sloan, prompt as always. Please escort our guests to their rooms and make sure none gets lost on her way, will you? Pleasant dreams, ladies.”

En masse, they followed Mrs. Sloan into the hall, bumping into one another with shuffling steps like sleepy lambs being led to their slaughter. When Serena rose to follow, Westcroft stepped closer and put a hand on her arm to stop her.

“What did you do to them?” she demanded, pulling her arm free.

“Nothing. I but eased their fear a bit.”

“You mesmerized them!”

“Not exactly, but they will remember this night more as a dream than a reality.”

“Until they wake up hungry, that is. You didn’t even give them supper.”

“No, I didn’t, did I? How remiss of me. Are you hungry, Miss ...?”

“Blanford,” Serena supplied without hesitation, totally reassured now that her disguise remained intact.

“Are you hungry, Miss Blanford?”

“No, thank you. I should like to leave now as well. Will you cloud my mind as you did theirs?”

“Do you want me to?”

Surprising even herself, she shook her head. He had done his best to intimidate

her, but he hadn't really hurt her. Still, it was unconscionable for him to terrorize the others like that. And she told him so, directly.

"I didn't invite any of you here," he informed her curtly. "You are quite welcome to leave on the morrow if you wish."

She arched a skeptical eyebrow. "Really? Are you trying to say that someone else arranged for us all to arrive here together without your knowledge?"

"That is precisely what I am saying, Miss Blanford."

"What about the money?"

His left eyebrow arched slightly. "What money?"

"Do you mean to say that you don't know anything about the thousand pounds either?"

"A consolation fee, perhaps?"

"That would depend upon your perspective, I suppose, sir. The woman you select will become your wife with a promised thousand pound dowry. The others, if they agree to certain conditions and stay a minimum of one week, will each get fifty pounds in addition to the original fifty pounds sent once the contracts were signed and received. For each day a woman elects to stay *after* the first week, she is to receive another ten pounds. If you make them leave tomorrow, they get nothing more than the fifty their families have already received."

Dominic briefly closed his eyes. "I'll kill her. Sister or no, I'll wring her neck."

Acting instinctively, Serena reached out and placed her hand on his sleeve. The moment she realized what she was doing, she drew her hand back uncertain what had ever possessed her to touch him.

He regarded her through eyes deep and dark, then his lips curved into a wry smile. "I did not speak literally, so you need not fear for my sister's life. Unfortunately, I happen to care for her a great deal, so murder is out of the question."

Serena's chin lifted a notch. The beast was actually teasing her. After nearly raising her to the ceiling and dashing her brains out, he actually believed she would chat with him as if they were long lost chums sharing stories over tea.

"If you intend to send us away tomorrow, what was the purpose of all those tricks tonight?" she inquired coolly, though confident she already knew the answer, her question was prompted out of more than just idle curiosity. She wanted to know if he would tell her the truth.

He clasped his hands behind his back and regarded her thoughtfully. "Purely to cull you out of the flock, my dear."

"For what purpose?" she queried, wondering just how much he'd garnered about her through their brief encounter.

"I felt your strength, your powers, when mine briefly touched yours. I also felt your concern for the others. When the soup did not provide the desired effect, I upped the stakes, in effect, hoping you would eventually step forward to stop me. Which you did. Quite bravely, too, I must say."

"You are mistaken about me. I possess no special powers or magic," she insisted.

"You may not fully realize them yourself, but you do have powers, Serena Blanford, whether you acknowledge them or not. They are quite strong, actually, though a trifle unrefined. But for your sake, my dear, let us hope that your protests of innocence are genuine."

His threat, though gently spoken, was clear. He would not tolerate deceit of any sort. Serena did not mistake his ability to do her and her cousin great physical harm, but she refused to let him know how much he had frightened her. Instead, she regarded him with a haughty bravado and said, "Well you, sir, are nothing more than a bully."

"I can be much worse than that, sweet Serena," he warned softly, "so I suggest you take care not to try my forbearance further if you do not wish to incur the wrath of my darker half."

Her emotions in turmoil, Serena couldn't suppress a shiver from the cold fingers of dread that crawled up her spine. Realizing she may have taken one step too far, she raised her chin and said, "Then I shall bid a good night to you, sir, else I may regret what words pass through my lips next."

Unclasping his hands, he gave her a short bow. "Good night, then. Should I have Mrs. Sloan escort you up also, or do you know the way?"

"I assure you that I can find my way unaided, sir, thank you anyway." That said, she swept in front of him and went up the stairs.

Needing to check on her cousin first, Serena knocked on Allison's door. Allison opened it very slowly and peeked around, when she saw Serena, she ran forward and hugged her.

"I was so concerned about you, I didn't know what to do."

"I am quite unharmed," Serena reassured as she shut Allison's door.

"What did he do to you?"

"Nothing. We just talked."

"Does he know who you really are?"

"No, but he suspects something, and I think he believes I might represent some sort of threat to him."

"What sort of threat? Is it your visions and intuitions? Does he know you've seen him in your dreams?"

"I'm not sure what he knows, but he could have hurt me, and he didn't."

"Maybe not, but he wasn't very gentlemanly, either."

"No, he wasn't," she admitted softly. "All the same, I sense a deep chasm in his soul. He's changed a lot, Allie. I remember him as being handsome, tall and charming. He even took time to play with me, though I was only seven years old at the time and he was nearly eighteen. Yet the vision I had of him holding my dying sister in his arms returns nightly to haunt me. I have to know if he killed her."

"Well, I don't like the way his eyes seem to pierce right through me. They're so cold and mean. He scares me."

"I can't say that I blame you. I was chilled by his penetrating gaze more than once myself tonight also. Even so, he didn't really hurt anyone, and a part of me almost feels assured that he doesn't intend to."

"You're defending him!" Allison accused.

"No, I'm not. I'm just saying that you needn't fear he'll attempt to enchant or enthrall you. Despite his rather unsavory reputation, I don't think he means to physically hurt any one of us, and"

Serena wasn't sure she wanted to admit that he had no knowledge of their invitations. She suspected he would honor his sister's agreement, even though it might gall him to do so, and telling the others that he did it not because he wanted to, but

because he had no choice, wouldn't ease their minds any. In fact, it might make them feel less valued than they already felt. So instead, she finished, "and, he regrets what happened this evening." It was a small lie. In truth, she didn't think he regretted a moment of his actions, since it brought him exactly what he wanted. But what puzzled her most were her own feelings of ambiguity towards him. She'd come here convinced he was the cold-blooded murderer of her sister, but now, even after his softly spoken threats, she was beginning to have doubts. Not of his ability, but of his intent.

"Perhaps," Allison conceded after a long moment of hesitation. "Even so, I don't think I want to stay here any longer."

"I won't ask you to stay if you really don't want to, Allie, but think of what your mother will say if you return without the five hundred extra pounds she expects."

Allison shook her head. Like Serena, she knew full well what her mercenary parent would say, and it wouldn't be complimentary. "I'm tired," Allison admitted. "Perhaps I should go to sleep and see how I feel tomorrow."

"A wise decision," Serena concurred as she gave her cousin a kiss then turned and headed to her own room. Allison would remember the night as a fuzzy dream, and she alone would know the truth of what happened. Serena didn't sense any evil in Westcroft, but he wasn't exactly house-trained either. There was a chance that the white leopard that mauled her sister in her dreams could be just that--a figment of a terrified little girl's nightmares. He wasn't at all what she expected him to be. In truth, she didn't know how she felt about the man now that she'd met him again. And that unsettled her even more.

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After his meeting with Serena, Dominic strode directly to his library and sent for his sister. Regina had much to answer for, and he intended to see that she did, though what he'd told her about his thirtieth birthday had not been entirely correct. When he was sixteen years old, Zaltasar had warned him that to complete his powers he would need to mate with a woman pure of spirit and body prior to his thirtieth birthday. If he failed to do that, he would slip into a steady decline that would result in him not only losing his powers, but cause him to lose his mind as well. In short, he would slowly go insane until he would eventually need to be locked up for his own welfare and that of others.

The same would have held true for Terrence, but Terrence had fulfilled this particular obligation many years ago. Marriage was not a requirement, just the taking of an innocent virgin was. Dominic had had the opportunity, but he had never felt the inclination until he met Felicity. He had only been seventeen years old then, and though the thought of making love to Felicity before he'd married her had appealed to his randy libido, he felt it would be disrespectful to her.

So, he'd waited, and his only opportunity had been denied him. Even so, he hadn't been entirely convinced that Zaltasar's dire prophecy wasn't merely an attempt to get Dominic and Terrence to settle down by a certain age. However, during the past few years Dominic had begun to wonder if Zaltasar's timeline wasn't just a bit overstated. His black moods, as he called them, seemed to be increasing in both frequency and duration the older he got.

Since he'd told Regina none of this, her actions were still unconscionable in his opinion, and he meant to ensure she fully understood the depth of his displeasure over the matter.

When Regina finally answered his summons, she looked less confident than she had before, which appeased him somewhat, but not entirely.

Sitting back in his chair, he templed his fingers beneath his chin. "I believe there were a few points you neglected to mention about these transactions you've made." Lowering his hands he leaned forward in his chair. "Such as the hundred pounds you offered to each woman who remains with me for a week."

"Well, you aren't the easiest of men to be around at times, so I had to give them some incentive. Besides, it's only an additional fifty pounds to what you've already paid."

"That's still a hundred pounds of *my* money! Most of our villagers pay no more than seventy-five pounds a year in rent. I hope you didn't expect me to conjure up the funds through magic. I doubt Her Majesty would appreciate enchanted currency floating about her realm."

"I believe you have sufficient funds to support this venture without resorting to magic, Dominic."

"Not for long if you keep trying to give it away."

"You're as rich as Croesus even without the title, so stop complaining. Did you unmask your vixen?"

He counted to ten under his breath, then sighed in resignation. "Eventually. Have all the women undergone purity validation?"

"All except the Blanford women, they refused to submit to the trial."

"Why?" he inquired, his suspicions roused anew.

"Serena didn't see the point in either herself or her cousin, Allison, being validated since they had yet to decide if they wished to accept you."

Dominic's brow rose at that and he grinned. "Somehow that seems fitting. Make arrangements to test the cousin tomorrow. I'll see to Serena Blanford myself."

This time Regina raised an eyebrow. "Have you made your choice already?"

"No, and I shan't be, despite your grand machination. The thought of marriage is not why I chose not to send them all packing tomorrow. I get the feeling that Miss Blanford is hiding something. Her powers are strong, yet she claims not to have any. I wouldn't put it past our brother to plant an informant in our midst."

"What?" Regina asked, her pallor revealing her dismay more eloquently than her words. "You can't seriously believe that Serena Blanford is here as some sort of agent for Terrence?"

"I only say that it's a possibility, not a certainty. I suspect I shall be able to get to the truth one way or another very quickly." He settled back in his chair. "Now tell me all you know about these Blanford women."

CHAPTER THREE

Serena awoke the next morning with a feeling of unspecified dread. The day was bright and clear, and she'd slept well, yet she couldn't seem to put aside her premonition that something very bad was about to happen. Serena didn't particular care for these unpleasant intuitions, since they usually were right.

Preferring not to appear conspicuous, she selected a conservative navy blue silk skirt with a pleated panel and its matching jacket complete with a high standing collar and a stiff leather belt. After dressing quickly, she crossed the hall and knocked at Allison's door. Allison opened it with a bright smile that complimented her sunny yellow day dress. So, whatever bothered Serena clearly hadn't affected Allison.

Not wanting to upset her cousin, Serena said nothing about her premonition as they headed down to breakfast. But at the top of the stairs she could see Westcroft and his sister waiting for them at the bottom. She wanted to tug Allison back upstairs, but feared it would appear both cowardly and suspicious. Rather than alert her hosts that she suspected anything was amiss, she continued down the stairs without a pause.

When she reached the foot, Westcroft extended a hand and caught her arm. "I need to talk to you," he advised firmly.

"But my cousin and I were just about to go to breakfast."

"Your cousin can go with my sister. You will come with me."

"But"

"Allison will come to no harm, Serena," he promised in a tone that was both firm and gentle. "You have my word."

Then, before Serena could argue further, he escorted her into a large room where every wall was lined with books. Surmising she was in Westcroft's library, she asked, "Why did you insist upon separating me from my cousin?"

"I'll answer your query shortly, but first I would like you to answer a question of mine. Why do you think your aunt sent you and your cousin here?"

Though Serena didn't particularly care for his calculating expression, she considered the question fair given the circumstances. "Like many of the other girls' families, my aunt and uncle are in need of money. My uncle fell seriously ill recently and now they are having difficulty paying off their creditors."

"Do you not care for your aunt and uncle?"

"That is a rather odd question to ask."

"Perhaps, but from your actions of late, I gather you wouldn't mind seeing them locked away in debtor's prison."

Serena hesitated only slightly, but she feared the man beside her had gathered quite a bit from her hesitation. "Of course I would mind."

"I don't see how that's possible."

"Why not?" she asked, feeling just the tiniest bit defensive.

"Because if you'd truly cared, you would've seen your part of the contract filled."

Serena regarded him through narrowed eyes. "If you refer to that barbaric custom your sister is masquerading as some sort of purity validation, you would be right. How

can you insist upon putting innocent women through a trial that causes them to suffer so?"

"What is it you think transpires?"

She hesitated again. "I'm not sure exactly," she admitted truthfully, "but no woman who submitted to it appeared better off for the experience."

"They weren't harmed," he insisted.

"Maybe not, but they certainly weren't enhanced for having gone through the ordeal either. So why are you insisting upon it?"

"It is a requirement that must be met if I'm to marry."

"I don't understand."

"The woman I marry must be pure in both spirit and body. She may not have known, in the biblical sense, any man before me."

"I hesitate to ask, but what would happen if you married only to discover your wife did not meet those qualifications?"

"It would mean a forfeiture of my powers, among other things."

"You would no longer be a wizard, or sorcerer, or whatever it is that you are?"

"I would still be what I am, but my capacity would be greatly diminished.

However, if my wife had powers of her own, her abilities would increase my own, assuming she met all the necessary qualifications."

Serena shook her head. "I fear I must decline. There is no point."

Dominic held still for a moment, and then gave a single nod. "I regret you feel this way, but I understand and appreciate your position."

Serena was surprised and pleased that he did not try to give her an argument. He merely walked her to the door and called a servant over. "Henry, please assist Miss Blanford to pack. She will be leaving this morning."

Serena gazed at him in disbelief. "Why are you doing this?"

"There is little point in your remaining if you refuse to fulfill the terms of your contract."

"I originally came here to serve as my cousin's companion. Why can't I remain with her as such?"

"We have an abundance of servants to see to your cousin's needs, Serena. There is no need for you to remain on in that capacity, and as your cousin appears to listen to you, your interference could jeopardize all we are trying to accomplish here. It would be best for all if you were to take your leave as quickly as possible. Henry here will be more than happy to assist you in this endeavor."

Trapped by her own strategy, Serena realized he had outmaneuvered her. She couldn't protect Allison from the danger Westcroft represented if she was sent away, and unless she remained, she would never learn the truth about Felicity's death. She owed both her sister and her cousin that much at least. Blinking back angry tears of frustration, Serena lifted her chin and confronted the man who certainly had the ability if not the desire to murder all of them. "It would seem that I have little choice but to comply with your wishes in this matter. What is it you would have me do?"

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Excusing Henry with a nod, Dominic was careful to keep his expression neutral as he extended his arm to Serena. When she accepted his escort, he led her down the hall toward the same room where Regina took Allison. Seeing Serena's uneasy expression,

he murmured. "I can assure you it is a most simple procedure. A trifle unpleasant perhaps, but not what I would call painful."

"Your assurances offer little comfort, sir."

"And would my word offer more?"

She regarded him carefully. "Since you have never submitted to this validation trial yourself, it would seem doubtful you or your word could speak from personal experience."

He grinned despite himself. Serena was feisty, and smart, and he rather enjoyed bantering with her. As they neared the room, he could hear Allison crying. He almost turned Serena around, but she heard it too, and rushed through the unlocked door before he could stop her.

* * * *

Holding Allison in her arms, Serena turned an accusing glare toward Westcroft.

"I thought you said the validation process wasn't painful," she countered as Allison clutched at Serena's arms as if she feared every letting go.

"It was terrible," Allison confessed with a watery sob as she pointed to a man standing in the corner. A man Serena hadn't seen before. "*He* forced me to drink this foul concoction, and then he thrust his hand beneath my skirts and pressed his fingers into me."

The man in question stepped forward. "It was one finger," he contradicted firmly, "and I didn't hurt you."

Allison sniffed and regarded him with accusing blue eyes. "Yes, you did."

He appeared a little nonplussed for a moment, then with a short bow he apologized and stepped toward the door. As he passed Dominic, he murmured in a low voice, "Brother-in-law or not, nothing is worth this."

Serena heard him, though she doubted he spoke for her ears. As she scowled at Westcroft, she almost wished her gaze possessed the power to kill or at least cause great discomfort. "What was in that drink you forced on her?"

"Unicorn's blood," he answered blandly.

Serena gaped at him in horror. "You made her swallow animal blood?"

He lifted a brow. "As the unicorn is a mythical beast, that would be rather difficult, don't you think?"

Serena frowned, her confusion battling with her mistrust. "Then what was it?" she inquired suspiciously.

"An herb, similar to a truth or *veritas* potion, but this one validates the truth of one's essence or spirit rather than their words."

Serena wasn't sure she wanted an answer to her next question, but she had to ask it anyway. "And what happens if a person's essence does not meet the necessary requirements for this unicorn herb's validation process?"

"Failure would mean the individual possessed a nature seeped in evil or deceit. And if that were true, after drinking the potion, the person would get violently ill," he replied evenly.

Serena looked back at her cousin with concern. "How do you feel?" she inquired carefully.

"Sore," Allison replied with a sniffle.

Afraid, but unwilling to show her fear, Serena glared at him with a look of pure

disdain. "So, do you always have your brother-in-law do your dirty work for you?" she demanded.

Dominic Westcroft regarded her with an arched brow. "Only when a physician is required," he answered civilly, but coolly.

"How convenient," she snapped back, wanting to slap him for smugness.

From the look on his face, she fully expected him to tell her that the reason for Dr. Sinclair's presence was none of her concern, but for some reason he changed his mind. "Jonathan Sinclair was Regina's husband and the good doctor's brother," he replied, keeping his voice low and calm. "When Jonathan died unexpectedly, Regina moved in with me and Dr. Sinclair came to offer her his support. Then, when Jonathan's death left us with more questions than answers, Frederick remained on as our physician. So, I'd hardly say his appearance here is a mere *convenience*."

A part of Serena felt small for her pettiness, but she refused to show it. Frederick Sinclair may not have hurt Allison, but he'd upset her, and that was enough.

Placing a comforting arm around Allison, Serena helped her cousin to her feet, but when she stepped forward, Dominic blocked her. "I'd like to see my cousin to her room," Serena insisted, her back stiff and straight and her chin high.

"I'm not sure that's wise. Regina can see Allison to her room. You and I, however, have some unfinished business to attend to."

Serena felt the blood drain from her face. She didn't expect him to insist upon conducting her validation personally.

Dominic seemed to sense her unease. "Would you prefer I send for Dr. Sinclair instead?" he inquired politely.

Serena hesitated, then shook her head. She didn't like the thought of having to undergo this trial at all, but having someone she'd never met before perform such a personal examination of her held even less appeal. And yet the notion that she would prefer to have her innocence validated by a man she'd suspected was guilty of murder over a certified physician made her question her sanity. Not a moment ago, she believed him capable of ripping her sister's body to shreds, yet here she was basically telling him she would prefer to be alone with him than have someone else validate the purity of her body and soul. The plain truth was that Serena was afraid of what might happen. Never one to give into her fears, she tried to convince herself, along with Mr. Westcroft, that the true reason she didn't wish to remain alone with him was because it would mean she'd be abandoning Allison again.

However, the matter was firmly settled when Regina stepped forward and put her arm about Allison's shoulders. "Come along, dear. We'll have a nice, hot cup of tea together, and by tomorrow this will all be a forgotten memory."

Dominic kept his gaze fixed on Serena while Regina spoke encouragingly to the cousin and led her from the room. He had no idea what he would have done if Serena had asked him to send for Frederick. Though he had made the offer, a part of him firmly rejected the notion of another man touching her so intimately. The strength of his reaction thoroughly puzzled him. Frederick was a doctor, and a good one at that, but that knowledge did nothing to ease the knot that had formed in Dominic's stomach.

Needing to distance himself from Serena for a moment, he stepped over to a basin and washed his hands. "Why don't you recline back on the divan and try to relax," he suggested without facing her.

Serena wanted to ask him if he'd be able to relax had their positions been reversed, but her lips and tongue were too dry to form the words. Instead, she sat on the sofa-like chair Allison had occupied just moments before, and asked, "Which trial do you perform first? The drink or the physical examination?"

He turned back to look at her. "Does that matter?" he inquired evenly.

"I suppose not," she answered in a small voice, certain she would fail one if not the other.

Grabbing a towel from a nearby rack, he regarded her carefully. "Though Dr. Sinclair is one of the best physicians in England, he has no magical talents."

Serena stared down at her tightly clasped hands. "What difference would that make to your validation process?"

"Not much, I suppose," he replied, rubbing his hands dry. "Except that I do not need an herb to see into a person's soul."

"Oh," she answered, not sure if that revelation reassured or unsettled her even more.

"I do not intend to hurt you, Serena," he vowed quietly as he put the towel back on the rack. When she didn't reply, he firmed his tone and commanded, "Look at me."

She hesitated, then slowly lifted her chin until she evenly met his unblinking stare. His blue eyes examined her so intently that his spirit seemed to traverse the space that separated them and delve into her mind through her eyes. She wanted to draw back and hide, but she was pinned in place by nothing more than the strength of his gaze. She felt trapped and comforted at the same time. Jittery and calm. Scared and reassured. Then he closed his eyes, releasing her from his thrall.

When Serena felt like she could breathe again, she asked, "What did you see? Did I pass?"

He looked at her then, but his eyes held little of the gentleness they'd shown before. "Lie down, please," he ordered quietly.

Disconcerted by the sudden coldness in his tone, Serena lay back as he directed and pressed her hands to her stomach feeling very much like the virgin sacrifice she likened herself to.

Once she was settled, Westcroft stepped over to the divan and sat down beside her. She closed her eyes, telling herself that he didn't intend to hurt her, he was simply doing what was required to satisfy the terms of his contract. Yet a part of her wondered what happened if she did fail this validation. Would he insist she leave anyway?

When he started to reach for her skirts, she sat up. "Please. Before you begin this part of it, could you tell me what happens if I don't pass?"

His blue eyes impaled her like twin icicles. "Have you some reason to suspect that you won't, Miss Blanford?"

The formality of his address unnerved Serena deeply, but she did her best to hide it. "No, not exactly, but I have occasionally ridden astride. My aunt caught me once and warned me that I could ruin myself for marriage through such folly."

"And is that the only reason you fear failing?" he inquired silkily.

She hesitated for just a moment, then nodded.

"If you speak the truth, you have nothing to fear. In any case, we shall discuss it further if I determine such a conversation is warranted."

Serena nodded, then laying back again she tightly closing her eyes and said, "You

may proceed, if you wish. I'm ready now."

With her eyes closed she couldn't see his expression, but she could feel his fingers brush along the edge of her cheeks when he silently wiped away her tears. Then after a moment, he spoke. "I repeat my promise to you, Serena Blanford. Nothing I do now is being done with intent to harm you," he vowed, his voice quietly reassuring.

"And I . . ." Unsure what she wanted to say, but afraid she'd say too much, she lamely finished, "Thank you for that."

His hand moved from her face to her hip where it rested lightly for a moment before it began to gather up the folds of her skirt. Unable to help herself, she gave a small gasp but said nothing more until she felt him reach beneath her skirts for the tie on her split bloomers.

Without thinking, she laid her hand over his and promptly opened her eyes. "Is that really necessary? Can't you do what has to be done with my undergarments in place?"

"I could, but I would prefer not to," he admitted with a small tug.

Swallowing nervously, Serena put her hand back at her waist and closed her eyes again. She was definitely out of her element here. She felt his warm hand brush a caress across her bare stomach, and her taut muscles quivered at the sensation. His fingers were warm and sure as they eased the flimsy cotton barrier to her knees, and then traveled back up between her thighs.

She could feel herself growing moist, and suspected something was wrong. Surely, the tight heat centered between her legs couldn't be natural. It was as if a part of her secretly longed for his touch, while her rational self most assuredly did not.

When his fingers lightly grazed the hairs that protected her femininity, her legs parted almost against her will. Frightened by her own reaction, she blindly reached for the hand she felt resting near her waist. His strong fingers wrapped around hers with reassuring squeeze, while his other hand glided smoothly toward his target. Despite her every effort to relax, she couldn't help tensing when she felt his finger ease between the folds of her femininity.

"Easy," he murmured gently as his finger started to stroke her in a way that caused her to jerk and gasp with intense pleasure. She gripped his other hand harder, uncertain if she wished him to stop or continue.

As his stroking grew more purposeful, she felt an uncertain tension building inside her while her hips gave an involuntarily upward thrust in reaction. Her nails dug into the back of his hand as her knees rose to give her hips more leverage. This was not at all what she expected. She whimpered deep in her throat as his finger slipped inside her, then she jerked again at the small twinge of pain she felt.

"Sorry," he murmured, easing the pressure slightly. But rather than withdraw as she'd expected, he began to slowly move his finger in and out of her in a way that had her moaning like a cat in heat.

He bent forward until his lips practically touched her ear. "Give into the feeling, Serena. I want you to take pleasure from my touch in the same way I take pleasure in touching you."

Unable to stop, even if she'd wanted to, Serena arched her back while her body sapped every inch of will from her conscious mind. Her hips met his deep, intimate stroking with an instinctive, wanton rhythm. "Please," she begged, uncertain what it was

she wanted, but certain she would die if he stopped.

“I’m here, Serena,” he reassured, as his finger expertly teased and coaxed her body into a feverish dance with every nerve and cell within her centered on one small spot. When the pleasure began to build to an almost pain-like point, her body tensed in a breathless suspension as it reached for something beyond her understanding. Then the building intensity burst and shattered into tiny shocks of pure bliss. Pulses of pure ecstasy spread out from the very center of her being to her extremities and she involuntarily cried out with her release.

Dominic continued to hold and soothe her until her breathing finally calmed. Then with the ease of long practice, he retied her bloomers and helped her into a sitting position.

Serena felt utterly mortified.

She couldn’t believe she’d allowed him to touch her in that way. What’s worse was the knowledge that she’d actually begged him not to stop. She didn’t even know him. Not only that, she had very good reason to believe he had clawed her sister to death.

She wanted to run upstairs and hide in her room, but when she attempted to move, he firmed his grip.

“I believe I have satisfied the terms of your condition, and I should like to leave now,” she managed, barely holding back her tears of humiliation.

Instead of releasing her, he drew her onto his lap. Then holding her face between his palms, he bent his head and kissed her. The moment his lips touched hers, she was filled with a reassuring sense of calm. Wrapped securely within his arms, she felt treasured and cared for as if he considered her to be something precious. Desire curled up within her like a sleeping, sated beast. She suspected it wouldn’t take much to rouse the beast into demanding another feeding, but Dominic eased the kiss until she stopped shivering and finally quieted in his arms. Then drawing back slightly, he ran a finger over her tender lips and gazed at her, his desire for her burning in his gaze. Pressing down lightly on her chin to keep her lips parted, he bent his head toward her again, and she eagerly tilted up her face to meet his kiss when a knock at the door sent her surging from his lap to her feet.