

CHAPTER 9

“Světla,” Pyotrik murmured. Lights began to glow, tiny pricks too insubstantial to counter the stygian blackness.

As the dot of lights joined, her dulled senses awoke. The air was still cool, but had lost that stale, dank feel. Somewhere deep in the recesses of the room, water dripped. Music, barely discernable as the band from the restaurant, underlaid the darkness. She inhaled. What was that delicious spice?

The light held at a low level, barely sufficient to see the room basics: one chair and a bed that might be covered in velvet and silk, shelves carved into the rock. A wooden table, scarred and worn, dominated the room’s center. Every level space was jammed with vials and bottles of best-left-unknown contents, books of unreadable titles, and ancient scientific equipment like scales and beakers and tongs. What really caught her attention, though, was a chest next to the chair.

Or, more to the point, the tray of food atop that chest. She had no trouble seeing, and smelling, that. Her mouth watered. Fragrant cream soup. Grilled, spiced meat slices. Hot, thick bread – she could see the steam rising. And butter. Carbs and fats be damned, she was hungry.

Pyotrik nodded toward the tray. “Eat first, Giselle.”

She sat and dug into the food. Pyotrik, stretching out on the floor, nibbled at the meat, but mostly watched her. At last she brushed the last crumbs of bread from her hands and sighed. “I’m full.”

“Good. Then we can have dessert.” He snapped his fingers and the tray disappeared.

“Caramel or strawberry?”

“Caramel.”

Eyes crinkling in humor, he reached into his leather bag and pulled out a ceramic pot.

“Excellent. I have a weakness for caramel.” He pulled off the lid with a flourish, and then resting the pot on his palm, he offered it to her.

She dipped a finger into the pot, scooping out a dab of the thick amber sauce. Inhaling the butter sugar scent, she licked the caramel off her fingertip. Rich sweetness, thick and milky, burst across the tip of her tongue. “I have never tasted caramel so intense.”

He capped the caramel, laughing at the flit of disappointment that must have shown on her face. “We’ll taste more in a moment. First, there are some things you must understand. Kneel on the floor and flatten your hands beside you, maximum contact with the powers imbued in these stones.”

The floor wasn’t near as comfortable as the chair, but she complied, remembering her promise.

Pyotrik knelt behind her, setting his bag beside him. She glanced behind, curious, but he bracketed her head and gently faced her forward. “Don’t look at me, focus on your own body and power. First, you’ll learn to recognize the power, next you’ll learn to tap into it, and then we’ll attempt a couple of rudimentary spells.”

“Which step will be the hardest?”

“The second. Make no mistake, Giselle, this power is not a trifling matter. It is both awesome and fearsome. There is a shadow side to it, one you need to accept and use.”

She shifted uneasily, her knees starting to hurt. “Can I sit cross-legged instead of kneeling?”

He paused, as if considering. “It’s not the common stance, but as long as the necessary contacts are made —”

She took that as a yes and gratefully shifted.

“I think I like this even better,” Pyotrik whispered, reaching from behind her to trail his fingertips up her exposed inner thighs, scraping across the silk of leggings with a soft wish. His thumb danced across her clit, pressing the cloth against her sensitive, swollen labia and sending a fresh

wave of arousal to her tuned body.

She gripped his wrist, although whether she intended to pull him away from the pleasure he gave or urge him to stay, she wasn't sure.

“Uh,ah,” he warned. “Fingertips on the ground. Maximum contact.”

She flattened her palms against the floor. Despite the coolness of the stone, warmth spread through her, from the pressure of his hand, from the latent energy of the rock beneath her.

His body cradled hers from the back, his legs sprawled on either side of hers, dipping slightly over her knees. He rested his hands on her hip bones. She was embraced and surrounded by his heat and his scent of spice and caramel.

“For those who wield power over the physical, sex in whatever form,” he explained, his voice a melodic chant, “foreplay, friendly fucking, even rape strengthens this power, renews it. The strongest union, however is sex between two united souls.”

“Us?”

“Once, too briefly. I'm hoping you will remember and be willing to risk everything to keep that connection. I would cross time and space for you, Giselle. Would you do the same for me?”

Was he asking for her to accept this as her reality?

Was that the way to freedom? Or madness? Love forever in an unreal world of her own mind?

Never to see her brothers. Her friends. No Friday dinners ever again.

She swallowed, frozen. An impossible choice, even for the sake of this man, this world of colors and passion.

He swore, something pithy and foreign. “Ah, my brain wasn't in charge of my mouth just then.” He ran a soothing hand across her nape. “Forget my rashness. Focus on the magic within. All else will take care in time.” His fingers circled lightly atop her temples. “Think only of the taut heat of your skin and the sweet tastes of kissing.”

She allowed herself to be mesmerized by the intonation of his voice and the lulling, exciting

circle of his hands. Questions retreated into the far recesses of the room. She leaned back, bracing against the firm wall of his chest, even as she tilted her head back to allow him better access to her face and neck.

“Ah good,” he murmured and stroked his hand down her neck and beneath her shirt. He thumbed her already taut nipple with a lazy stroke, and she sucked in a sharp breath at the spear of need. “There’s a pretty pink flush to your skin.”

“I don’t wear pink.”

“You are now, and I adore the color of it. Don’t close your eyes. Watch everything. Absorb everything.”

His hands continued their flitting over her, touching anywhere, everywhere, so her skin tingled and flushed everywhere, both hidden and exposed. She found she could see his motions from the corner of her eye and reflected in odd surfaces like mercury in tube or a polished silver beaker. Her fingers pressed deep against the stone, as she fought to keep herself from reaching for him. Or reaching for herself, if he refused to satisfy the growing need.

Only Pyotrik could do this to her, arouse her so quick with his touch, without letting her touch him back. All the while, he whispered sex to her and demanded answers, compelling her to notice and acknowledge and absorb each sensation.

“Are you aroused?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“How? Does your pussy grow wet? Is your belly tight?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

“I’m wet and slick. There’s dampness between my thighs.” Her breath came in dark pants as he slid beneath the Ninja strips and dipped a finger into her.

“Describe it for me.”

“Thick and flowing. My muscles clench around it. Fail to hold it. I’m aching for something solid. A vibrator. A cock. Thrust deep.” Sweat broke across her skin.

“What else do you feel between there?”

“Your hand. Your fingers. Inside me. I’m coming, Pyotrik. From you.”

“No.” He withdrew his hand. “Hold that release.”

She gave a moan of frustration, deprived of that edge of sensation right before she flew on an orgasm.

“Tell me more.” He shifted to kneel in front of her. “Do your breasts ache, too?”

“Yes. Heavy. Need a mouth sucking them. Nipples. Two tight beads, popped off a string of pearls.” She formed barely coherent words.

“And that pink skin?”

“Too small. Membrane of a volcano.”

“Ah.” He breathed a satisfied note. “The energy beneath the arousal. Feel it, Giselle. What’s different? What’s fresh?”

“I don’t feel—”

“You can.”

There is was. Something spiraling from her fingertips to her groin. Something dark and strong, chicory coffee in the soul.

“Draw it in. Clench your muscles. Store it. Breathe deep. Taste.”

Dark stars rippled out from the base of her spine with each word. He must have opened the caramel pot again, for he touched her lips and she tasted the thick sweetness.

Too much. Too needy. She whimpered against the fear rising with the desire. She was no seeress, to delve so deep.

She focused on him. “You’re hard, too.”

“Watching you does that to me.”

“Join me. I want you inside me.”

“It’s not the best way.”

“It is for me. I want you. In my arms, inside me.” He still looked doubtful, so she dipped her finger in the caramel. Touched his lips, then kissed him. He was sweet and firm, a potent desirous mix. His lips worked hers with a sensual caress. Just as his tongue touched hers, she pulled away.

She took another dab and licked her finger again, relishing every final driplet and the way his nostrils flared as his eyes narrowed. Deliberately she took another scoop, then sucked her finger, mimicking the way she could lick his cock. “Sweet,” she murmured. A third time she entered the jar and pulled out the sweet dessert. This time, she touched it to his lips, then licked it off. Open-mouthed. “Sweeter.”

He grabbed her wrist, hard enough that she couldn’t get free with a simple tug. “The magic, Giselle.”

“I’m feeling it.” She did, something light and wispy and pleasurable, like sex magic should be. Not that surge which carried dark thoughts and deeper pains. “The magic curls in the pit of my belly.”

“Curl in your belly?” he asked with scorn. “Nowhere fucking near what you should be feeling.”

“Don’t tell me to feel,” she snapped, then pressed her lips together at the surge of anger. Not what she’d agreed to tonight. Instead, she dipped her free hand into the caramel and pulled up the sauce. A small drop fell to her leg, and she felt Pyotrik’s hot gaze trace the path of it.

“Any suggestions what to do with this?”

Pyotrik recognized her tactics. Take charge, control the pace and keep the feelings direct and simple. He’d done the same when he was aching with the loss of her.

His gaze shifted back to hers as he returned the smile, but his response was neither restrained, nor polite. It was as feral as the beast growling within him.

With a flick of his fingers he pulled pillows from the bed to the floor. “Lie down.” The command was coated with a growl, leaving no doubts that it would be obeyed. “And remember your

promise.”

Her confident smile slipped a little, then her chin tightened and her smile brightened. She thought she was still in charge.

Slowly she lowered to lie with her head on the pillows. Lifting her knees, she spread her legs. The soles of her bare feet planted firmly on the rock. Then, she lowered a strip of cloth and painted her belly button with caramel, letting some drip to the soft skin of her abdomen. Finished, she leaned back on her elbows and grinned at him.

Damn, but she looked like a pagan sacrifice, anointed with glistening caramel.

“Leave your legs like that,” he asked hoarsely, and she nodded.

He ran his hands down her thigh, positioning her feet near her hips. Her bent knees exposed her silk-clad groin to his view. With two fingers, he parted the silk strips to the side, exposing what he really wanted. “I like looking at you.”

“I’d like it a sight better if you were kissing me.”

Fuck, yes. He bridged over her, bracing his hands and knees on each side, then took her soft lips. Blood pounded against his ribs in familiar arousal, unfamiliar joy. Her breasts next, through the silk. The pebbled nipples tickled his tongue, while the curve of her breast brushed his cheek. Ah, she made such lovely moans.

He nibbled his way down, past the sensations of cool silk, over the ripple of her muscles, to the scorching heat of her bared abs, to the sweet caramel that decorated her. He lapped at her, drawing up every sweet droplet, but, more important, feeling the skin pulse of growing arousal and the power of magic.

His magic. Not hers, still buried beneath layers of numbness.

He suckled at her bell button, pulling the skin into his mouth, knowing he was leaving the faint mark of his teeth and not caring a crap. Don’t think beyond the need to nourish on her arousal. To show her what she needed to do. With each knead of his lips, he drew in the power of their connection.

The chill of the room lost to the tide of the rising sweat of sex and the thick dampness between her thighs.

“Do you feel it?” he growled against her skin.

“Yes. Oh, yes.” She laid her hand on the side of his head and the jolting power almost made him spew his come right there.

Her hips were moving in tiny pulses. He looked up, over her belly, to the small smile decorating her lips. Fuck it. Not enough, not open and vulnerable and raw enough. The shell of her arousal bound the magic.

Pushing back, he drew in a stabbing breath, his chest tight, his cock tighter and needier. Throbbing inside him grew, until he pinched the tip of his cock, pressing back the orgasm, keeping himself from coming all over her right then, mixing semen and caramel on her belly.

The terrifying reality gripped him.

She was blocking the magic. With Vasili setting his sights on her, that lack of knowledge shoved her in grave danger.

To protect her, he knew what he had to do.

He hoped she would forgive him when it was over.

Giselle looked through her lashes at her lover. Why Pyotrik had stopped tasting her? To her shock, he seemed almost angry. The spiral of desire collapsed as Pyotrik’s hand clamped around hers, hauling her upright. She tried to shake him off, but he didn’t let go.

“Kneel there.” He jerked his head toward the spot where she’d knelt before.

What bug had bit him? Puzzled, she did as he asked, then reached for him, finding herself still insatiable, still aching. Pyotrik again took her hands, stopping her. “I would prefer it if you’d stop grabbing me.”

This was getting irritating. “Why did we stop?”

He didn’t answer her. Nor did he let her go. Instead he chanted. “The symphony of our dance

begins at the night. Hush words, harsh choices, by her choice, bind her to my dominance. Free her to her feminine power. Until my lady's will doth quake to the needs, so shall we dance the night."

To her utter shock, a thin yellow cord spun from somewhere amidst the pillows and twirled around her wrists, binding them about two inches apart. She jerked, trying to get away from the cord and to separate her hands, but some magic held her in place. Before she could draw a second breath, she was trussed.

"What the hell, Pyotrik?" She jerked again, but her wrists were held fast and her hands had limited play. When she tried to stand, her legs felt as solid as a pair of beads, and she sunk back to the pillows. "Let me go."

Bondage had never been part of her fantasies. Well, not heavy-duty. Velvet-lined handcuffs may have played a part in a scenario or two.

"No."

"This isn't funny."

"It wasn't intended to be." In the shadowy room, Pyotrik's face was all planes and shadows, his grey eyes dark as flint. The amber at his ear glowed like an animal's eye, untamed and merciless in the necessities of survival.

This man was no longer playful, nor amusing. He was hard and determined and relentless.

"Please." She hated the pleading note, hated worse the flip of panic.

"You agreed. I'm calling the shots. You're not listening with your senses, yet. The walk over here was all about what your mind knew, not about what your body felt. That interlude we just shared? Froth."

"I'm feeling now. It's called anger."

"When you find the block to your senses, when you direct your magic, then you will be able to remove the bonds." He laid out the book of poetry, open to a page, but just a little too far and angled for her to read. "Until then, I dominate."

“What if I never control my magic?”

“Then your body will be at my whim.”

His fingers traced across her jaw, and much as she wanted to pull away, she couldn't. Although whether that was because of the magical binding or because she liked the stroke, she couldn't quite say.

The binding brought tints of both fear and excitement. For so many years, she had no choice but to be in charge --efficient, organized, ready with a decision, responsible for worrying about her brothers, even as she loved them. Could she –

“You're thinking, mi amour,” Pyotrik whispered, then pinched her nipples, startling her out of her reverie.

“I –” What could she say? She had been analyzing again.

“I think we start with food again.” He held a piece of pineapple to her lips.

“Where did that come from?”

He ignored her question. “Taste this with your tongue, before you draw it into your mouth. Tell me what you taste.”

“Sweet juice.”

“Again, feel it deeper. What else? Where does your tongue experience the sweetness most?”

He pressed another pineapple to her lips.

“Sweet acid. Right here.” She ran her tongue tip across the ridge of her teeth. “And at the back of my throat.”

“Taste again.” This time he held the pineapple tidbit between his lips.

This time, when she drew her tongue across the fruit, she also touched his mouth and felt the ridge of his teeth. “Sweet acid. The salt of your lips. Their firmness.”

He fed her a continuous stream of tiny bits so she had no chance to stop and think, only taste and enjoy. While she ate, he ran touches across her body, not sparing a single inch. Her throat, the crook of her arm, the inside of her wrist, the corner of her eye, her clit, her little toes, her nape, her

spine – no part of her was hidden to him. The silk clothing proved no barrier to the sensations. Sometimes he used feather touches, sometimes he drew his nails lightly across her. Sometimes the touch tickled, sometimes it pinched. Sometimes he gave a quick, stinging slap, not painful, just startling. All random, no pattern or rhythm to it, keeping her unsettled and confused. Aroused, but never quite able to reach a satisfying orgasm.

He was aroused, too. She saw his filling erection, as his dick lengthened, and thickened. Yet, everything he did, with every touch and command, his attention was on her, testing her reactions, eyeing her tightening nipples, telling her how pretty the pink flush of her skin was, occasionally dipping a finger inside her pussy as it began to weep and clutch, eager for him again.

Not only touches. Not only tastes. With perfumes and aromas, music, sips of lemon water, he awakened all her senses.

All for her. She felt her body, pinpointed sensation. The power she'd felt before rose again inside her, like sparkling bubbles from some fathomless well. Still unmanageable, but this time, she didn't worry about that, didn't strain to catch it. Instead, she tilted her head back as Pyotrik's lips clamped onto her breast, tugging it deep into the moist cavern of his mouth. A low moan escaped her.

“Feel that magic?” he whispered, pulling back a little.

“Ah . . .” Words impossible. Only her body so alert. The scratching of a tiny mouse and the tide of Pyotrik's breath. Lingering tastes – sweetness, dates. A callus on his hand faintly rough against her thigh. His breath hot on the damp silk. Her ribs and belly afire with fuel of each separate sensation. She closed her eyes.

“Pull it here.” He touched her in the middle of the forehead. “Here.” Above her heart. “Here.” Her genitals. “To here.” His nail stroked the bottom of her foot. “No longer a mass of emotion, of sensation. A pillar. Draw it under your control, to each center of our powers. Tightest here,” he rubbed her clit, the petals, “for this is where your power centers. Consolidate it. Grow it.”

His voice became a mere current, absorbed as background to each surrounding sensation. His

touch rose spurts of glowing power inside her.

“First ask, what fear holds you back?” His voice grew fainter, as a maelstrom tossed within her.

Fear? What could she fear when she was so fricking good?

Draw it in. Each power center throbbed and pulsed, as she drew the energy to her core. First to her amazement, then to her intense pleasure, energy streams connected into a pillar of shimmering magic. Brightest and deepest at her sexual centers. Sex magic.

The power whirled, gained intensity like a feeding hurricane spiraling into Category five. Grew dark and ominous.

She couldn't control it; she'd lost Pyotrik's guiding voice. Her eyes opened, her eyelids almost too heavy for the task.

The shadows had deepened, until the room was darker than a storm-shrouded night. She could see nothing. Nothing of the alchemist's tools. Was that wink of amber? No. Nothing of Pyotrik, either.

Nothing except a dull square of light above the book of poetry.

She was alone? With the magic. She tugged at the yellow cord, but it held fast. She tried to move. She couldn't.

“Pyotrik?” A dab of panic quivered in her voice.

No answer. Not even a stir of air to show he was still in the room. She peered deeper, but other than that single pale smudge of light, everything was lost. Pyotrik had left her?

“Pyotrik?” she called again, the magic maelstrom fueled by a trio of panic, by fear, by anger.

No, dammit, he couldn't have just left her here, bound and helpless.

Not helpless. Never helpless. Her breath came in pants. She'd refused to be helpless.

She tried. Control the pillar. Throw her energy into the bonds. Scoot closer to the book.

Nothing worked. She couldn't move, couldn't get out.

Tears streamed from her eyes. Choked her. What did he want of her? Expect of her? Where was the guidebook? She'd dutifully followed the plan for seven years.

Seven years she'd been in control.

What do you fear? The whisper of a voice, more in her head than spoken, was ancient. The alchemist who had once cast his spells in this room.

"I'm not afraid."

The light above the book dimmed.

"No! Don't leave me!"

It couldn't leave her here in the dark. He couldn't leave her. They couldn't leave her.

A wisp of fog curled around her feet. She felt the cold tendril bind her ankles. An answering pang speared her abdomen. Vasili?

Spots spun before her eyes. Hyperventilation. The energy of the pillar churned, an inner tornado. She had power. She just had to control it. Use it.

Before it burned her from the inside out.

Grab it before it spun her out of control.

What keeps you from it? The alchemist.

You, the woman who won't even go to a movie on a whim. Kate

You used to be wild. Marissa.

What is your true fantasy? Madame Claudine.

What keeps you from it? The alchemist.

Fog thickened at her feet, moving up to encase her in ice. Old desperation and panic hovered at the brink of recognition. The voices spun their accusations in her mind, and then began to fade.

If they left her, she'd have nothing. She'd be bound and helpless. Helpless. Caught. Again. She couldn't do that. Not again. Sobs pounded her chest. "No! Don't leave me!"

Who? Whispered the alchemist.

“Momma. Papa,” she shouted back. “Why? How could you die and leave us? Me?” Tears soaked her neck, her lashes. Bitter anger lodged in her throat. “I had plans, someone I loved, and I wasn’t ready.” She voiced the irrational, let pain and abandonment take her. “How could you be so selfish? Dinner with friends?” she spat.

Blindly, she reached out, just able to move. “You shouldn’t have left!” she screamed. Her bound hands found the tray of food. She yanked it up and tossed it. Hard, into the darkness. Glassware shattered; plates and silver clanked in violent discord.

Suddenly the rage broke as well. Her chin dropped to her chest, as she pulled in a sob of air and repeated, softer, “Momma and papa.”

A stir of air brushed across her lips, and she opened her eyes. The shadows were gone from the room. Except for the broken tray, all was as it had been. Pyotrik sat cross-legged beside her, watching her, his face blank, without censure or approval.

She jerked her head toward the debris. “I’ll pay for that.”

He wiped at her tear with his thumb. “Don’t worry about it.”

Her body trembled with the aftermath of festered, buried hurt now raised. “I know my parents didn’t choose to be hit by a drunk driver,” she told him, not knowing if he understood, but needing to speak. “Logically, I knew that, but my eighteen-year-old emotions didn’t. I hated them for dying, and I felt like shit for feeling that way. Mostly, I knew I didn’t dare tell that to a soul.”

His strong hand cupped the side of her neck, telling her without words that he accepted all of her.

Seven years ago, she’d grieved. Quietly, stoically, the one who had to be strong for the boys. She bit her lip, her voice thick. “Everyone at the funeral, afterward, they praised me. So composed. So mature to do what had to be done.”

“Do you regret that choice?”

She shook her head. “No. I don’t.”

“But?”

She'd never raged. Never cursed at harsh fate. Never swore at her parents.

“I walled off half my emotions. Never acknowledged the ugly ones. Forgot that living meant taking chances.”

“Pain, chaos, loneliness, resentment are part of all of us.”

“As much as joy and friendship and orgasms.”

Can't have one without the other. Accept them. And let them go.

“Giselle—”

She placed her bound hands against his lips, silencing him. “First, I have to do something.”

She could move just enough to scoot closer to the book of poems. Yes, that was the one she needed.

Taking a moment, she focused not on the words, but on the pillar of energy inside her.

She had been wrong a moment ago, when she'd thought nothing had changed. Her gaze rested on a pearlescent orb, sitting on a shelf, seeing new colors and the hint of magic within. Even when she'd been walking through the streets of Prague and marveled at all the sensations, she'd still only been half-alive compared to what she could feel now, see now, taste now. Like a thin layer of plastic had melted away.

Memories of Pyotrik and the loving they shared, burned white hot in the core of her groin.

Carefully, she directed a thin thread of it to the yellow cord at her wrist, as she leaned forward to read and chant the brief poem. “Be not still my heart. Ride the wind of my lover's breath. Catch the pierce of loss's arrow. Do not go quiet into darkness. Free my tears. Bind only our faith.”

The cord unraveled, falling in a puddle at her knees. Experimentally she waved her hands through the air. She felt so light. So free. A grin broke across her face, and when she glanced over her shoulder, Pyotrik had a matching smile.

Suddenly she gave a whoop of joy and launched herself at him. She straddled his hips and wove their hands together as she pushed him backward into the pillows. Laughing, he offered no

resistance. She leaned over and kissed him, teasing him with her tongue, as she rubbed herself across his sprung-to-life erection.

“I think you’ve got a few things you need to pay for,” she murmured against her lips. “Like touching me here –” she lowered their entwined hands to her breasts, letting his fingers brush against her tight nipples, “when I couldn’t touch you back.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“This.” She shifted their mutual grip to beneath his penis, scraping ever so lightly against his balls. “I’m going to recharge you.”

“And what am I going to do?”

“You’re going to show me how to do those magic things you promised.”

“My pleasure to do my seeress bidding.”

Pleasure they did, recharge they did, learn they did. She showed him kisses and strokes and playful ways to use the alchemist’s tools. He showed her a shield, and the lightning bolt of blue fire.

Sexual magic sparkled and charged between them. They hovered, once more on the brink of union, the amber of her necklace throbbing against her throat, the amber of his earring a beacon in the fog.

The fog?

Suddenly Pyotrik lifted from their kiss and cast an anxious glance around their bower, now cold and filled with fog.

“Vasili has found me!” Pyotrik sprang to his feet and Giselle followed. He spun to her, pulling her into a hard embrace, then kissed her. Hard, fast, deep, his hands cupping her head and spearing through her hair. She kissed him back, giving him breath and power. Pyotrik reared back, his grey eyes glittering like smoked onyx. “I can no longer delay.”

He ran out, cutting through the fog to the door, which slammed heavily behind him.

What the hell? He wasn’t leaving her behind! They were strongest together and he hadn’t said

stay here.

Giselle followed, running. She yanked open the door and sped into the corridor. Which way? The stone walls, the dirt on the floor, all obliterated by the fog. Only the heat of her amber led her to choose the right. She sped forward, or at least sped as much as she could without tripping and breaking a leg. The fog thickening, swirling around her like pearlized air. She didn't dare call out for fear of alerting Vasili. Trusting in the magic between her and Pyotrik, she stumbled forward, until her hands met the slick handle of a door. Silently, she tugged it open and ran through . . .

. . . Straight into Maison du Fantasie.