

## WE TWO MAY MEET

Tanya Huff

MAGDELENE was beside herself when she woke that first morning home from Venitcia—which wasn't really surprising as she'd never been much of a morning person. If truth be told, she was more of a midafternoon, heading into cocktail hour kind of a person.

What *was* surprising was that the self she was beside appeared to be snoring

Mistress?" Kali's red eyes widened as two wizards walked into the kitchen—identical but for the fact that one had her thick chestnut hair pulled back into a tight bun and seemed to be wearing an outfit in which all the items not only complemented each other but covered her from neck to knees. The demon housekeeper turned to the other wizard, whose hair fell in the usual messy cascade and who was wearing a vest and skirt in virulently opposing shades of green. "Mistress, there are two of you."

"No." The first Magdelene crossed the kitchen and pulled a mug embossed with the words *The most powerful wizard in the world* off the shelf. "There's still only one of me. I just seem to have gone to pieces."

Kali sighed, but said, as was expected, "Well, pull yourself together."

"Not without a cup of coffee."

"Very funny," the second Magdelene snorted. "But neither displaced humor nor your unseemly addiction to that beverage is getting us any closer to solving our problem!"

"We've managed to determine that she's my unfun bits," Magdelene-one informed the demon, sinking into a chair and reaching for a muffin.

"I hope you're not having butter on that!"

"Also my nagging, uptight bits."

"Mistress, how did this happen?"

Magdelene-one shrugged, spreading butter liberally on the muffin. "Beats the heck out of me. She was there when I woke up; large as life and twice as tidy."

"And I can't seem to get her to care," growled Magdalene-two through clenched teeth. "We must find out who did this to us and why."

"It's too hot to care." One stuck her foot out into a patch of sunlight and grinned down at the shadow of her bare toes on the tile floor.

"Mistress, if there is a wizard powerful enough to do this . . ."

"What difference does it make? I mean, really? It's been done."

"You see? You see what I've had to put up with?" Two glared down at her double. "Well, fine. I don't need you—I was only including you in the process to be thorough. I can get the answer on my own." Pivoting on one well-shod heel, she stomped out of the room, the door slamming behind her.

"What a bitch," One snorted.

"Mistress, if she is a part of you . . ."

"Then I'm well rid of her."

The door swung open hard enough to crash against the wall. "What have you done to my house!"

Magdelene-one sighed, reaching for another muffin. "What do you mean, your house? Try, my house."

"The tower is *missing!*"

"Is not."

Shaking her head, Kali went out into the hall. Not only was the tower missing but two of the hall's four doors opened into the garden and the door that should have returned her to the kitchen led sequentially to the sitting room, the bathing room, Joah's old room, and a room the demon didn't recognize although, from the piles of debris, it appeared to be a storeroom of sorts. A half-grown calico cat meowed indignantly down at her from a stack of crates.

"I have no idea," she said, closing the door again. If the house was causing the cat's problems, things were even more serious than they appeared.

A fifth attempt finally took her back to the kitchen. Magdelene-one was licking the jam spoon while Magdelene-two made notes on Kali's recipe slate.

"The house," she announced, "is out of control."

"That's just so unlikely," Magdelene-one scoffed stickily.

"Nevertheless, Mistress, it is the case."

Sighing heavily, Magdelene-one heaved herself up out of the chair and sauntered over to the door, Magdelene-two following close behind, arms folded and lips pressed into a thin line. They walked out of the kitchen and stood in a square hall, warmly lit by the large skylight overhead.

"Sitting room, bathroom, stairs to the Netherhells . . ." The doors opened and closed showing the rooms behind them as they were named. ". . . stairs to the tower." Magdelene-one rolled her eyes and headed back to the kitchen. "You guys make such a fuss over nothing."

As the door closed behind her, the house shifted and the green-and-gold lizard who had moments before been sunning himself in the garden stared up at Magdelene-two in shock.

"You're right," she told it. "The situation is completely unacceptable. Fortunately, a reasoned analysis finds a simple solution." Opening a door, she reached into the kitchen, grabbed her other self by the back of the vest and hauled her into the hall. The lizard disappeared, the doors returned. "Clearly, we must stay together in order to maintain the house."

"Clearly," Magdelene-one mocked. "Why?"

"Let me think . . ."

"Oh, you're thinking. I can smell the smoke." Magdelene-two ignored her.

"As you observed previously, there is still only one of us, we have merely been separated into pieces. It's therefore logical to assume that our power has been equally divided between us. Together, we remain the most powerful wizard in the world. Separate, we are merely powerful—and not powerful enough to mindlessly support old magics."

"That sort of sucks."

"Indeed. We need answers." Clutching her other self's elbow, Magdelene-two threw open a door and marched them both up the steps to the cupola on the top of the tower.

"Stairs; what was I thinking?"

From the outside, the turquoise house on the headland seemed to be only one story tall. From the cupola, the two wizards had an uninterrupted view of the surrounding countryside from fifty feet in the air.

Magdelene-one gazed down at the cove and the fishing village that hugged the shore. "Nothing much happening there. Wait a minute, that's Miguel working on his boat. Would you look at the shoulders on the man. And the ass—you could bounce a clam off that ass." Leaning forward, she whispered something as if in Miguel's ear. The fisherman turned and waved. Even at such a distance, they could see his broad smile.

"What did you say to him?" Magdelene-two demanded suspiciously.

One giggled. "I told him that if the kaylie weren't running I knew something else he could spend the morning spearing."

"Have you no concern for your dignity? And if not," she continued, before her double could reply, "have you no concern for mine? We are the most powerful wizard in the world and we have position to maintain!"

"Prude."

"Slut."

Magdelene-one stuck out her tongue, flickered once, and glared across the room. "You stopped me! How dare you stop me!"

Hands on her hips, Two returned the glare. "Have you forgotten why we came up here?" A half turn and a sharp wave toward the large oval mirror in the rosewood stand. "We must discover who did this to us!"

"Why?"

"So that we can undo it."

"Why?" One asked again, dropping down onto the huge pile of multicolored cushions that filled most of the floor space. "Personally, I think I'm better off without you dragging me down."

"Me dragging *you* down?" the other Magdelene snorted, turning to the mirror. "Oh, that's a laugh."

The mirror—an expensive replacement after a wizard wannabe had broken her original trying to use the demon trapped inside—showed nothing but a reflection of both Magdelenes.

"You've broken it!"

"I haven't done anything."

"Oh, you never *do* do anything, do you?"

"At least I know how to enjoy myself," Magdelene-one pointed out. She flashed her double a sunny smile and vanished.

"At least *I* won't end up with sand in unmentionable places," Two sneered to an empty room.

"Where . . . ?"

"The village. She is such an embarrassment, Kali." Lowering herself into a chair, legs crossed at the ankles, Magdelene-two quivered with apprehension. "I shudder just thinking of how she's perceived."

"The villagers have always treated her—you—with respect, Mistress."

"But she's so . . ." Manicured nails beat out a staccato beat against the polished wood of the table as she searched for a description that managed to be both accurate and polite and managed only: ". . . enthusiastically athletic."

"From what I have heard, they respect that as well, and I have received the impression on a number of occasions that some are rather in awe." Kali set a lightly steaming cup of tea on the table by the wizard. "Did you discover who is responsible for this division?"

Magdelene-two took a ladylike sip of tea and sighed. "I'm afraid not. The mirror is nonfunctional and showed only our reflections. Whoever divided us in two must have disabled it in order to cover their tracks."

The demon nodded thoughtfully.

"What's this?" Magdelene-one blinked down at the lightly steamed vegetables and the poached fish on her plate.

Kali placed a pitcher of water and a glass on the table. "Lunch, Mistress. High in fiber, low in fat. Your double ordered it."

"Then why isn't my double here eating it?"

"She remains in the workshop, delving in eldritch realms to discover the cause of your affliction."

"Hey, it's nothing a little salve won't cure. Oh, *our* affliction. Right. Well, she's going to get us into trouble with that whole eldritch realms thing. It's likely to bring on an angry crowd of villagers with torches and pitchforks. And, hang on, I don't have a workshop."

"She has added one on, Mistress."

"And you just let her?"

"I am her housekeeper as much as yours, Mistress. If you are unhappy with her decision, perhaps you should confront her yourself."

"Yeah, probably, but I don't really feel much like doing it now. Maybe later." A lazy flick of a knife point teased apart two translucent flakes of white flesh. "Any chance of getting some tartar sauce with this?"

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Magdelene-two demanded. She tossed a cushion onto the ground, dropped to her knees on the cushion, and began inscribing runes in the fire hearth. "I'm laying out protective wards around the house."

"Didn't there used to be cat mint there?"

"Do you *want* what happened last night to happen again?" Magdelene-two sniffed, ignoring the actual question.

Magdelene-one settled back down in the hammock and scratched at her bare stomach. "Don't see how it can. We're already in two pieces."

"And what would you say to four pieces?"

"Five card draw, monkey's wild, it'll cost you a caravan to open."

Magdelene-two sniffed again. "You're making absolutely nonsense."

"With four," her double sighed, "we'd have enough for poker."

"You think you're very funny, don't you? You're just lucky you have me to take care of things."

A tanned hand waved languidly in the hot afternoon air. "Whatever makes you happy, sister."

"Don't call me that!" Two protested, vehemently tucking an escaped strand of hair back behind her ear. "I'm not your *sister*, I'm you!"

"Then I really need a nap. I'm not usually this cranky."

"Kali, what is this?"

"Supper, Mistress." Thankful that the kitchen was one of the more anchored rooms, Kali put down the plate of spiced prawns in garlic butter. "Your double ordered it." When faced with the inevitable, she felt she might as well just say the lines assigned.

Magdelene-two's lip curled. "Then why isn't my double here eating it?"

"There was a delivery from the village this afternoon."

"A delivery of what?"

"I do not know. He never reached the house."

"Why not?"

Kali opened her mouth to answer, but a raised hand and a scarlet flush on the wizard's cheeks cut her off.

"Never mind. How can she take a chance like that? He might not be a mere delivery boy, he could easily be our enemy attempting to take us unawares. He could be the wizard who divided us, arriving to check on our weakened condition." Magdelene-two leaped to her feet. "He could have weapons designed to destroy us!"

The demon placed her hand on the wizard's shoulder and pushed her back down into the chair. "I believe he was searched quite thoroughly," she said.

Magdelene-two looked up from placing her folded clothing neatly into a chest and clutched at her voluminous nightshirt. "What do you think you're doing here?"

"It's *my* bedroom."

"Excuse me, I believe that it's my bedroom."

"Whatever." Magdelene-one shrugged. "It's a big bed." She began to work at the laces on her vest.

"I am not sharing this bed with you."

"You're not my first choice either but . . ." The vest hit the floor, quickly followed by the skirt. ". . . so what. It's late. I'm sleepy. And this is *my* bed."

"You can sleep in one of the spare rooms."

"I don't want to." She kicked her crumpled clothes into a corner. "Besides, I have dibs. I'm clearly the

original."

"And how do you figure that?"

"I have all the dominant character traits."

"You're a lazy, lecherous slob!"

"I rest my case." Triumphant, she dropped onto the bed. "And you're only angry because you know I'm right . . . HEY!"

Releasing her double's ankle, Magdelene-two stepped back and pointed toward the door. "Out. Now."

Magdelene-one scrambled up off the floor. "You shouldn't have done that."

"Really? What were you planning to do...AWK!" Pressed up against the back wall, she struggled to get an arm free.

"I plan to get some sleep if you'd just shut up . . . OW!"

For every offense, an equal defense. For every spell, a counter-spell. For every pillow slammed into a face or across the back of a head, there was a pillow slammed in return. The pillows were, by far, getting the worst of it.

The villagers stared up at the lights and noises coming from the house of the most powerful wizard in the world and they wondered. Some wondered what fell enchantments were afoot. Most wondered why they hadn't been invited to the party. One wondered why the ground seemed to be shaking slightly. . . .

The impact shook the house and knocked both Magdelenes to their knees, hands buried in each other's hair.

"Now what have you done," Magdelene-two demanded, eyes wild.

"Wasn't me," her double denied hurriedly. "It must have been you."

"Well, it wasn't. Unlike some people, I maintain perfect control at all times."

"So, if I didn't do it and you're maintaining perfect control," Magdelene-one mocked. "Who's doing all the banging . . ."

The second impact was more violent than the first.

The wizards' eyes widened simultaneously and together they raced for the hall.

Unencumbered by the tangled ruin of a nightshirt, Magdelene-one reached the door first and threw it open, peering down the long, long flight of stairs that led to the Netherhells. Swinging free, the door began to tremble.

"DUCK!"

After the impact the two wizards lifted their heads to peer wide-eyed at the object embedded in the wall.

It was a large bone, almost five feet long and a hands' span in diameter. Crude sigils had been carved around the curve of the visible end.

"That can't be good," Magdelene-one observed, standing.

Gaining her feet a moment later, Magdelene-two crossed to the bone. "It appears that one of the demon princes is attempting to breach the door. This sigil here is the sign of Ter'Poe, and this the sign of conquest, and this . . ." She tapped her finger lightly against another. "This is what appears to be a corrupted version of my name with certain Midworld influences apparently creeping into the actual lines and curves."

The other wizard gave an exaggerated yawn. "Even facing potential disaster you're boring."

"Potential disaster, Mistresses?"

They turned together to face the housekeeper.

"You don't think an invasion by the Netherhells where we all end up murdered in our beds and all manner of evils like sloth and gluttony... "Magdelene-two paused long enough to glare at her double. ". . . run loose in the world is a disaster?"

"I merely question your use of the word 'potential,' Mistress.

If their missile was able to reach the house, they are already through the door."

On cue: the distant sound of pounding footsteps rose from below.

Magdelene-one scratched thoughtfully. "At the risk of repeating myself, that can't be good."

"You idiot!" Magdelene-two charged across to the open door and lifted both hands to shoulder height, palms out, fingers spread. "*And while the darkness from the deep doth into this world try to creep, I raise my powers from their sleep...*"

"What are you doing?"

"Stopping an invasion by the Netherhells!"

"With bad poetry?" Accepting a dressing gown from Kali, Magdelene-one belted it on then pointed down the stairs. "Go home."

"Ow!" The exclamation was distant but unmistakable. The footsteps paused.

And then they began again.

"That can't be . . ."

"Yes, we all know. That can't be good. Stop repeating yourself and start throwing things at them before we're horribly killed and responsible for the deaths of thousands."

"I don't think . . ."

"Fortunately for the world, I do."



"I can think of *someone's* death I'd like to be responsible for," Magdelene-one muttered.

"That . . . was close," Magdelene-two gasped, sagging back against the now closed door.

"Too . . . close," Magdelene-one agreed from where she lay panting on the floor.

"As long as your power remains divided, I very much doubt you could stop a second assault," Kali pointed out. "And there will be a second assault, Mistresses. You may count on that as a certainty."

"She has...a point."

"Two. They're horns."

"She has a point about the two of us not being able to defeat the demon kind a second time," Magdelene-two ground out through clenched teeth. "We have to do something before we're all destroyed. Before we're chopped into pieces and devoured. I'll return to the workshop and attempt to find the strongest spells we can perform with our reduced power."

"Good on you. I'll have a nap."

"No," Kali sighed. "You will both come with me to the tower."

"Kali, lest you forget I..."

"We," amended Magdelene-one.

". . . are mistress here."

Kali ignored them both and started up the stairs. After a moment, they exchanged identical expressions of confusion, and followed.

"The mirror is not functioning properly," Magdelene-two reminded the demon.

"Yes, Mistress, it is. Ask it other than who divided you from yourself."

After a moment spent working out demonic syntax, and another moment spent jockeying for position, the wizards took turns asking questions to which they already knew the answers. The mirror performed flawlessly.

"Now," prodded the demon, "ask it who is responsible for this division."

Magdelene-one shrugged, leaned past her double and asked.

The mirror continued to show only the reflection of the two Magdelenes.

"See? It's busted."

"No." Kali shook her head. "It is not. Think, both of you, who is strong enough to do this to the most powerful wizard in the world? You did it to yourself," she confirmed as understanding began to dawn. "The mirror has been giving you the correct answer from the beginning."

"We did this to ourselves?"

"Bummer."

"How? When?"

"When? It happened in the night as you slept. How?" Scaledshoulders rose and fell. "I do not know. Only you know."

"I don't know." Magdelene-one flopped down on the pillows. "Do you know?"

Magdelene-two pushed back a straying strand of chestnut hair and shook her head. "I'm forced to admit that I have no memory of doing any such thing."

"But clearly, it was done. And it must be undone before the world is overrun with others of my kind who are less . . . nice." Kali folded her arms. "For reasons only you can know you have brought this division upon yourself. Only you are powerful enough to undo what you have done."

"Granted, but we don't *know* what we've done."

"It is in your heads, Mistresses. It must come out."

"Eww." One's lip curled. "Look, I have an idea, let's just stay like we are."

"I want you back as a part of me as little as you want me in you," Two snorted, "but we have a responsibility to everyone in the world. We must save them from the encroachment of the Netherhells."

"Why? We've been saving them from that encroachment for a very long time. I say let someone else take the responsibility so I can have some fun."

"You've *been* having fun!" Magdelene-two reminded her sharply, arms folded over the ruins of her nightshirt. "In fact, you've been having everyone who's come within twenty feet of this house and it's GOT. TO. STOP."

"Bitch."

"Tramp."

"Mistresses, enough. You must pull yourselves together before disaster overcomes us all! There is a man," Kali continued, shooting a warning glare toward Magdelene-one, "a Doctor Bi-neeni, in Harmon, a town three days' travel inland. I have heard he attends to problems of the mind."

"Heard from who?"

"The baker's husband has a nephew whose friend had very good things to say about the man."

"The baker's husband's nephew's friend?" One shook her head in disbelief. "Oh, yeah, that's a valid recommendation."

"Do you have a better idea?" Two demanded.

"Sure. I leave and the demon princes do what they want to you."

"Fine. Two can play at that game."

"It is not a game and no one is playing." Kali's crimson eyes glittered. "If you have no consideration for the peoples of this world, then consider this: the demon princes have vowed vengeance for the death of their brother. They will not care how many pieces you are in when they begin, but I guarantee you will both be in many more pieces when they finish. You may continue arguing and die, or go to Harmon and live."

The only sound in the tower was the soft shunk, shunk, shunk of Magdelene-one stroking a silk tassel.

"Live?" she said at last, glancing up at her double.

"Live," Magdelene-two agreed.

"We have to walk?"

Kali rolled her eyes, white showing all around the red. "You have never been to Harmon, Mistress. You cannot go by magic to a place you have never seen."

"What about borrowing Frenin's donkey and cart?"

"You may not be seen in the village like this. It will cause them great distress."

Magdelene-two looked pointedly at her companion who was wearing wide-legged purple trousers, an orange vest, and yellow sandals. "I can fully understand why."

"Ice queen."

"Sleaze."

Kali stared up at the huge wrought-iron gate overflowing the break in the coral wall and sighed. Deep and weary exhalations

weren't something demons indulged in as a rule, but over the last day she'd become quite accomplished. Had she ever stopped to anticipate their current situation, she might have expected two Magdelenes would be twice as much trouble as one. She would have been wrong. *Twice* as much trouble was a distinct underestimate.

"What in the Netherhells have you got in that thing?" Magdelene-one drawled, poking a finger at her companion's carpet bag.

"Clean handkerchiefs, water purification potion, bug repellent, extra sandal straps, desiccated dragon liver, a comb, one complete change of clothes, soap, a talisman for stomach problems . . . What?" Two demanded, the list having raised not one, but both eyebrows to the hairline of her listener.

"You do remember you're a wizard?"

"Your point?"

Magdelene-one held up a small belt pouch. "I have everything I need in here."

"And if we're unable to use our powers?" Two demanded.

"I still have everything I need."

"There's not enough room in there for a pair of clean underwear."

Rubbing at a rivulet of sweat, Magdelene-one grinned. "Goodthink I don't wear them, then. I still don't see why we can't take the carpet," she complained to Kali before her double could respond.

"With your powers divided, it would take both of you working in concert to keep the carpet aloft," the demon explained again. "Should your attention wander, even for a moment, it could be fatal."

"Three days on the road with Ms. Nettles-in-her-britches here could be fatal, too."

"No one ever died of boredom, Mistress. Or embarrassment," she added as the second Magdelene caught her eye. "And the sooner you begin, the sooner we can put all this behind us. Remember what is at stake." She all but pushed the wizards through

the gate and onto the path. As they rounded the first turn, already squabbling, she sighed again and closed her eyes.

Which was how she missed the black shadows slinking around the corner behind them.

soon soon

at their weakest

away from home

away from help

soon soon

Harmon was a largish town, four, maybe five times the size of the fishing village nestled under Magdelene's headland. It boasted a permanent market square, three competing inns, two townwells, a large mill, four temples, a dozen shrines, and one small theater that had just been torched by the local Duc who'd objected to having his name and likeness appear in a recent satirical production.

In its particular corner of the world, Harmon was about as cosmopolitan as it got.

Which could have been why no one gave the two identical wizards a second glance—although it was more likely they passed unnoted because no one knew they were wizards and they weren't, after three days' travel, particularly identical.

The shifting shadows of early evening hid the bits of darkness that entered the town on their heels.

soon

"Excuse me, we'd like a room."

"Two rooms," Magdelene-one corrected. "A dark, narrow uncomfortable room for her." She nodded toward her companion. "And a big, bright, comfortable room for me." Smiling her best smile, she leaned toward the barman. "With a big, bright comfortable bed."

Totally oblivious to the beer pouring over his hand, the barman swallowed. Hard.

Magdelene-two gestured the tap closed. "One room," she repeated, her tone acting on him with much the same effect as a bucket of cold water. "The one at the end of the hall with the two beds will do and we will not," a pointed look at her sulking double, "be sharing it with any other travelers." As four coins of varying sizes hit the counter, she swept the common room with an expression icy enough to frost mugs and drop curious gazes down to the tabletops. "First night's payment plus payment for use of the bathing room. I want the water hot and clean linens—clean, mind you, not just turned clean side out. And don't bother telling me you never do that," she cautioned, spearing the barman with a disdainful snort. "I *know* that you do."

"How?"

"We're the most powerful wizard in the world," Magdelene-one told him brightly while being dragged toward the stairs. A shower of coins hit the bar. "I'll get the first rou . . . OW!"

Maintaining her grip, Magdelene-two leaned in close to what should have been a familiar ear. *Except that one never sees one's own ear from that angle,* she reflected, momentarily nonplussed. "Don't you think we should be keeping a low profile?" she asked quietly, dropping her voice below the sudden noise of fourteen people charging toward the bar, tankards held out. "We shouldn't be letting the whole world know we're at half strength. That's just asking for trouble!"

"You worry too much." Rolling her eyes, Magdelene-one pulled her arm free. "Look, you have the first bath while I hang out here. I'll be fine." She sighed at the narrowed eyes and thin lips. "What? You don't trust yourself?"

"You are not the parts of myself that I trust!"

". . . so he said, *Are you waiting to see the whites of his eyes?* and I said, *Not exactly!*" Magdalene's gesture made it very clear just what, exactly, she'd been waiting to see. As the crowd roared its approval of the story, she upended her tankard and finished the last three inches of beer.

Before she could lower it, a hush fell over the room.

By the time she set the tankard on the table, the hush had become anticipation.

"Rumor has it you're a wizard."

A quick inspection proved her tankard was definitely empty. Since no one seemed inclined to fill it, she sighed and turned. There were three of them. Big guys, bare arms; attitude. Since this particular tavern didn't cater to the "big guys with bare arms and attitude" crowd, they'd clearly dropped by to make trouble.

"You don't look like a wizard," the leader sneered. "You don't act like a wizard." He leaned forward, nostrils flaring over the dangling ends of a mustache adorned with blue beads. "You don't smell like a wizard."

His companions grunted agreement.

"We wanted to see a wizard and we get pissed right off when we don't get what we want." A booted foot kicked the end of a bench; two people toppled to the floor.

Magdelene knew how to deal with this sort. One way or another she'd been dealing with these kinds of idiots her entire life. Unfortunately, she couldn't remember what she usually did. And the bicolored codpiece worn by the man on the right wasn't helping.

The bath was helping. Deep, hot water to soak away the road and the indignities. How could she even consider becoming one again with that low-minded, badly dressed hussy?

On the other hand, how could she consider allowing the Netherhells to visit death and destruction on the Midworld?

Vigorously exfoliating an elbow, Magdelene wondered how she'd got herself into a situation with no viable alternatives.

The sound of raised voices caught her attention. One of the voices sounded familiar, although the language left much to be desired and nothing at all to the imagination.

"Oh, for the love of . . ." The water sluiced off skin and hair as Magdelene climbed from the tub, and by the time she reached her neat pile of clean clothes, she was completely dry. Dressing quickly as the noise level rose, she opened the bathing room door, stepped out into the hall, paused, and returned to hang the mat neatly over the side of the tub. There were some things a wizard had to do to retain her self-respect.

She wasn't surprised to see herself as the center of attention in the common room. After pushing through the crowd, she *was* a bit surprised to see that the man who had her double by the vest was standing on chicken legs under the multicolored arc of a rather magnificent tail. There were two others, also half-man half-chicken and a couple of dozen onlookers who seemed uncertain if they should be amused or appalled. Whatever her other half had done, it had only half worked.

In the midst of being shaken, Magdelene-one caught her double's eye and croaked, "Little help here?"

Two rolled her eyes. "Were you going up the scale, or down?" she asked, pitching her voice under the roars of the chicken-man. "D...d...down."

The three roosters, the largest marked with blue dots on the ends of its wattles, made a run for the door and the wizards found themselves alone in the center of the room. The noise building in the surrounding crowd began to sound like an angry sea.

In Magdelene's experience, crowds became mobs very quickly. Familiar fingers interlocked, left hand to right. One voice from two mouths murmured, "Forget."

"Why roosters?" Two asked as they climbed the stairs.

One rubbed at a beer stain on her trousers. "Well, all three were acting like pricks and pricks are another

word for co . . ."

"I get it. You have to be more careful. Just because it's on your body, doesn't mean I want some overmuscled idiot rearranging my face. The world can be a nasty, brutal place and you must be prepared for that at all times."

"I don't think I want to live in your world," One snorted, pushing open the door to their room and slouching inside.

Two glared down at the handprint on her double's right cheek. "I *know* I don't want to live in yours." Closing the door with more force than was necessary, she walked over to the window

and reached out for one of the shutters. Frowning, she stared down into the inn yard. "The shadows are roiling."

"Yeah, whatever *that* means."

"They're excited about something."

Magdelene-one dropped onto the nearest bed and belched. "Probably not about the beer."

together

not now

not when together

when apart

"You Doctor Bineeni?"

The elderly man slumped over the scroll jerked erect so quickly his glasses slid down to the end of his nose. Half turning, he glared at the chestnut-haired woman standing in the door to his inner sanctum. "Here now, you can't just barge in unannounced!"

A second woman joined the first. "That's what I said, but she never listens to me."

Magdelene-one jerked a finger toward her companion. "Think she's my better half. What a laugh, eh?"

Pushing his glasses back into position, Doctor Bineeni stared. "Twins? But at your age even identical twins would be less than identical as differing experiences would write differing histories on the face."

"At our age?" Two bristled.

"You look . . ." He frowned. "But you're not young."

One sighed. "You don't know the half of it, sweet cheeks. We're the most powerful wizard in the world."

His eyes widened, strengthening his resemblance to a startled lizard. "You're Magdelene?"

Waving a bundle of dried herbs onto the top of the tottering pile across the room, One dropped into a

chair. "He's heard of us."

"That should make this easier," Two agreed. She ran her finger along the edge of a shelf and clucked her tongue at the accumulated dust.

"But . . . you're a legend. You don't really exist."

"Oh, I exist. You can touch me if you like. Ow!" Shooting an steaming look at Two, she muttered. "I meant he could touch my hand."

"Sure you did."

Wide-eyed the doctor looked from one to the other. "*You* are the most powerful wizard in the world?"

"Yes."

"Both of you?"

"That's correct."

"There should only be one of you."

"Also correct." Two dusted off her hands, tucking them into the sleeves of her robe. "It appears that in the split, we both got half the power . . ."

"And she got the really shitty bits of the personality."

". . . and we need you to put us back together before the Netherhells make another try for the stairs."

"The stairs?" Dr. Bineeni asked, looking from one to the other.

"Yes, the flight of stairs in my house that descends into the Netherhells."

He smiled and raised an ink-stained finger, shaking it in their general direction. "Almost, you had me, ladies. I can help with your delusion, but you'll need to make an appointment."

"Under other circumstances, I'd be more than willing to follow protocol, but we need to see you now."

"Ladies, I'm sorry . . ."

"Not as sorry as you will be if Ter'Poe gets up those stairs," One snorted. "We're not leaving until you help us."

The smile gone, Dr. Bineeni turned toward a back door. "Evan. Petre."

Two burly young men pushed their way into the room past the piles of books.

"Not bad." Magdelene-one fluffed out her hair and undid the top fastener on her vest. "One each."

Two stared at her in disbelief. "Is that *all* you ever think about?"



"No!" One's brows dipped in. "Well . . ."

"Slattern!"

"Anal-retentive!"

Evan, or possible Petre, reached for Magdelene-two's arm.

"Oh, go to sleep!" she snapped.

Both men fell to the ground.

"Horizontal. Very nice."

"Slut!"

"Ha! You're repeating yourself."

Two gestured. One countered. Power sizzled against power in the center of the room.

now

Darkness rose out of the shadows, divided an infinite number of times, took form and substance.

"Imps?" Two stared at the swarm of tiny figures scuttling toward her. "They dare to send imps against *me?*"

"Whatever." One didn't bother standing. She waved a languid hand and several imps imploded. The rest kept coming. Chestnut brows drew in. "That can't be good."

"Would you quit saying that!" Two shrieked as the first imps reached her.

They climbed into mouths and ears and noses. They tangled in hair. They tried to fit themselves into every bleeding wound they made. And for every dozen Magdelene destroyed, another dozen rose from the shadows.

Driven out of the chair, Magdelene-one staggered around the room, flailing power at her attackers. Stumbling over a muscular body, she began to fall and grabbed hold of the closest solid object: Magdelene-two's hand. As their fingers tightened, the wizard looked herself in the eye and smiled.

An instant later the only sign that a battle had been fought and nearly lost was the tangled mess of Two's hair.

"I can't believe they'd send imps after us," she growled, her hair rearranging itself back into a tight bun.

"I can't believe the imps almost kicked ass," One added.

A whimper turned them to face Dr. Bineeni, who was kneeling on the floor, staring up through the bars of his stool.

"You're actually her!"

Yawning, One dropped back into the chair. "Yeah, we actually are."

"And we need your help. You saw what happens when we try ; to fight the darkness as two separate wizards."

"Yes. I saw." Drawing in a long, shuddering breath, the doctor seemed to come to a decision as he slowly stood. "Who did this to you?"

"Well, it's like, uh . . ."

"Are you blushing?" Two demanded, taking a disbelieving step toward her double. "I wouldn't have thought you still knew *how* to blush!"

"Up yours."

"You know what your problem is? You're not willing to face reality." Straightening her robe, Two speared Dr. Bineeni with an irritated glare. "We did it to ourself. Ourselves."

"And you want me to...?"

"Put us back together."

Bushy gray brows rose above the rims of the glasses. "You want to be back together?"

"It doesn't matter what we want," Two explained over One's gagging noises. "We have a responsibility to the world to be back together before the Netherhells attack again."

"Not to mention a responsibility to not be personally sliced and diced."

"I see. You held hands to defeat the smaller darkness," he added thoughtfully.

"We can't keep doing that."

"Why not?"

"We can't stand each other."

"Again, why not?" He spread his hands. "Are you not both you? Do you dislike yourself so?"

"I like myself just fine," One broke in before Two could answer. "It's *her* I can't stand. Bossy, uptight, neat freak!"

"Lazy, lascivious—you don't care about anything but yourself!"

"Lady Wizards, please." Stepping over a sleeping bodyguard to stand between them, the doctor looked from one to the other and sighed. "What happened to make you dislike yourself so?"

Dr. Bineeni's consultation room was as full of books and scrolls and candles and jars as his inner

sanctum, but it also held a widechaise lounge. Magdelene-two created a second and the wizards—wearing identical apprehensive expressions—lay down.

"All right." Settling himself in the room's only chair, the doctor picked up a slate and a piece of chalk. "Let's start with somestream of consciousness. I'll begin a phrase and you will finish itwith the first thing that comes into your head. You," a fingerpointed toward Magdelene-one, "will respond first and then you will alternate responses. Are you ready?"

"Sure. I guess."

"With great power comes great . . . ?"

"Booty!"

Her chaise lounge collapsed.

"Hey! It was the first word that came into my head!"

"No surprise!"

"Lady Wizards! Please. Let's try something else. What is thelast thing you remember before this happened."

"I went to bed."

"Alone?"

"Yes. I'd just got back from Venitcia and I was tired."

"Venitcia?"

"A city." Two frowned, trying to remember.

"And you were there because?"

"I don't know."

The doctor turned to One, who shrugged. "You got me, Doc."

"This is important." Dr. Bineeni pushed his glasses up his nose. "I will begin the thought, I want you to finish it. I went toVenitcia because . . . ?"

"Someone asked for my help."

"Our help."

Right hand gripping the rail with white-knuckled fingers, Magdelene straightened and wiped her mouth on the back of her left. "Did I happen to mention how much I hate boats?"

"You did." Trying not to smile, Antonio handed her a water-skin. "And then you called a wind to speed

our passage, and then, if I'm not mistaken, you mentioned it again." He waited until she drank, then reached out and gently caressed her cheek. "Did I happen to mention how grateful I am that you would not allow this hatred to keep you from helping my people?"

"You did." Leaning into his touch, Magdelene all but purred. Not even the constant churning of her stomach could dull her appreciation of a beautiful, dark-eyed man. She liked to think that she'd have agreed to help regardless of who the Venitcia town council had sent to petition her, but she was just as glad that they'd hedged their bets by playing to her known weakness.

Until he'd climbed the path to the turquoise house on the hill, Antonio had thought he'd been sent on a fool's errand—that the most powerful wizard in the world was a legend, a story told by wandering bards. Told *enthusiastically* by bards who'd wandered in the right direction. Magdelene had always been partial to men who made music.

And to those who actually made an effort to seek her out.

"My village was built many, many years ago on the slopes of an ancient volcano, a volcano that has recently begun to stir. My people cannot leave a place that has been home to them for generations."

"Cannot?"

"Will not," Antonio had admitted, smiling, and Magdelene was lost.

"We're close," he told her, tucking her safely in the curve of

his arm as the boat rolled. "That is the smoke of the volcano. When we round this headland, we'll see Venitcia. . . ."

When they rounded the headland, they saw steam rising off the water in a billowing cloud as a single lava stream continued to make its way to the sea. There was no town. No terraced orchards. No temples. No wharves. No livestock. No people.

The captain took his vessel as close as he dared, then Magdelene and Antonio took the small boat to shore. It took them awhile to find a safe place to land and then a while longer to walk back to the town. Antonio said nothing the entire time.

Magdelene laid her palm on the warm ground, on the new ground, so much higher than it had been. "It happened just days after you left. Long before you found me. It was fast—ash began to fall and then the rim of the crater collapsed. The town was buried."

"How . . . ?"

"The lava told me." It had been bragging actually. She left that part out.

Antonio walked to the edge of the crust and stared down into the last river of molten rock. "Is everyone dead?"

"Yes."

He sighed, brushed a fall of dark hair back off his face, and half-turned; just far enough to smile sadly at her. "It wasn't your fault," he said.

Before Magdelene could stop him, he fell gracefully forward and joined his people in death.

Until that moment, she hadn't even considered that it might be her fault.

"I didn't take it seriously enough."

"I should have hurried."

"You called a wind to fill the sails of the boat," Dr. Bineeni reminded them gently.

"That was for my comfort," Two said bitterly. "Not for Venitcia."

Sitting with her back against the wall, legs tucked up against her chest, One wiped her cheeks on her knees. "I was too late."

The doctor shook his head. "It wasn't your fault. Antonio was right."

"Antonio is dead."

"Yes. But he made his choice. You have to let that go." Looking from one to the other, he spread his hands. "You can't raise the dead."

"Actually, I can."

Dr. Bineeni blinked. Then he remembered to breathe. "You can?"

"If the flesh is still in a condition for the spirit to wear it," Two amended.

"Although I sort of promised Death I'd stop," One sighted. "It screws up her accounting."

"So, given the manner of his death, you couldn't bring Antonio back."

"No."

"Nor any of his people."

"No."

"But if I'd known," Two insisted, "I could have stopped it."

"So many things I could stop if I knew," One agreed.

"But I don't know. Because all I do is lie in the sun and have a good time."

The doctor's brows rose. "All *you* do?"

"All I *did*." Two's lips were pressed into a thin disapproving line as she nodded toward her double. "All *she* does. I recognize my responsibilities."

"But without her, you can't fulfill them." He rubbed his upper lip with a chalk-stained finger as he studied

his slate. "I have one final question."

One scooted forward to the edge of the lounge, "then you can fix us?"

"No. Then you can fix yourself."

"If I'm going to fix myself," One muttered, "why'd I have to come see you."

Dr. Bineeni ignored her. "You have to learn to like yourself again."

"Myself, yes. Her . . ."

". . . no," Two finished, lip curled.

"We'll see." He sat back, glanced from one to the other, and said quietly, "You have, in your house, a flight of stairs that descends to the Netherhells. Why?"

One snorted. "It's convenient."

"Convenient? To have demons emerge out of your basement?"

"Well, it's more of a subbasement, but yeah."

"Why?"

"So that I know where they are," Two interjected before One could answer. "The demon princes gain power by slaughter. You don't want them running around the world unopposed."

"No, I don't." As the silence lengthened, he added, "Legend says there were once six demon princes, but the most powerful wizard in the world stood between the mighty Kan'Kon and the slaughter he craved, and now there are five. Mourn for Antonio, mourn for his people, but do not define the rest of your life by his loss."

Although she had the boiling oil ready at the top of the stairs, Kali stepped gratefully aside as a single pop of displaced air heralded the return of her mistress. The clothing suggested that only Magdelene-one had returned, but then she noted the purposeful stride and the light of battle in the wizard's eyes and the demon-housekeeper gave a heavy sigh of relief.

Even given that the light of battle was more accurately a light of extreme annoyance.

"Mistress, they are very close."

"I can see that," Magdelene noted as the bone spearhead came through the door. Grasping the handle, she flung it open and smiled at the demon attempting to free his weapon. "Hi. I'm back."

It froze. Those members of the demonic horde pushing up the stairs behind it who were within the sound of her voice, froze as well.

From deep within the bowels of the Earth, a fell voice snarled, "What's the holdup!"

"She's back."

Silence. One moment. Two. Then: "Oh, crap."

The demon at the top of the stairs curled a lipless mouth into what might have been a conciliatory smile.

"It it's any consolation," Magdelene told it, raising a hand, "you'll be at the top of the pile."

A moment later, the stairs were clear, although the bouncing continued for some time. Magdelene waited until the moaning and the swearing and the recriminations died down, then she leaned out over the threshold. "Don't make me come down there."

The lower door slammed emphatically shut, the vibration rocking her back on her heels.

"Temper, temper," she muttered, stepping back into the hall.

"I am pleased you are yourself again, Mistress." Lifting the vat of oil, Kali carried it into the kitchen. "I am happy the doctor was able to heal you."

"He got me moving forward again," Magdelene allowed, following her housekeeper. "Although I *am* the most powerful wizard in the world and I probably could have figured it out eventually on my own."

"We had time for neither probably or eventually, Mistress."

"True. I guess I needed someone to get into my head."

Kali stared at the wizard for a long moment, then surrendered to temptation. "That's a change," she said.