



ZENINA MASTERS

OCELOT OF TROUBLE

Mina is cursed. Robar is a playboy. The Crossroads brings them together to break old magic and make a new start.

Mina is a walking disaster. Any man who dates her ends up with some minor or major trouble in his life, body or vehicle. Her community bands together to send her to the Crossroads in an effort to find her a mate far away from the human world.

Robar is sent to the Crossroads by his matriarchal grandmother who demands a proper match for her grandson. He has a plan to cheat

the system, but fate shorts out the most carefully laid plans when he is transported.

Together, they run, frolic and he ends up wearing her drinks. What more could you want of a first date?

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Ocelot of Trouble
Shifting Crossroads Book Eight

By

Zenina Masters

Chapter One

The party raged on, but Mina was miserable. Every member of her family was here to support her aunts' efforts to send her to the Crossroads. It was well known that Mina wouldn't find a mate any other way.

Nine of the blind dates that she had had in the last year were in attendance, dancing with her cousins. They had paid to come to the fund-raising social in an effort to get her a mate. Even the men she had bruised and broken were

supporting her in her effort to find a man who wasn't them.

Mina was a klutz, and there was no way around it.

"Hey, Mina! You will be able to spend a month or more at the Crossroads with all of the donations rolling in!" Her cousin Leevi grinned and gyrated to the music.

"Yes. It's great. I am so grateful to you all." She mumbled it with the same tone she had been using throughout the entire evening. She was grateful. Really. She was just humiliated by her family banding together in order to send her somewhere else where the men had

no idea what they were getting into.

It seemed unfair to her that she was going to be circling around in search of a mate and the men wouldn't know that they were walking into the path of the Lancaster jinx. No man could possibly withstand her skill at causing injuries while simply trying to make a good impression.

She looked across the dance floor and saw the tables that were taking hair and nail clipping samples for payment to the transporter. It was heartwarming that her family was getting the community together

like this, but Mina's soul felt heavy.

There was nothing like knowing that you were the biggest loser that your friends and family could think of. She dragged in a deep breath and plastered a smile on her face. She forged into the crowd and shook hands and grinned at everyone she met, inwardly wincing at their eager faces as they told her how happy they were to support her chance of meeting someone outside their community who didn't know who she was.

No, that didn't hurt at all.

* * * *

Robar sat with his mother and grandmother glaring at him. "What?"

His mother tapped her fingers on the rich tablecloth. "I said you need to stop screwing around and find a mate, Robar. I want grandchildren and your flirtations are not going to get them for me."

"Stop fucking bimbos, Robar." His grandmother sipped her tea and smiled beatifically, but there was steel in her gaze.

"But, Nana...I have yet to find the woman for me." He tried to put an innocent look on his face, but his elegant grandmother saw right

through him.

“Zip it, Robar. You have been enjoying the good life for over three decades. It is time to do your duty to your family and be a man, not a boy.” His grandmother glared at him with her dark bronze eyes still keen. “Grow up.”

He blinked in surprise. “You are serious.”

Arduna Pickwik looked over at her mother. “She is serious. She is talking about cutting you out of the will.”

That sent a flutter of panic through him. “Nana?”

Loreada Alenfleur gave him an

impassive look. "I have arranged for a transporter. You are going to the Crossroads, and you are not coming back until you have a mate. I don't care how long it takes. Your time as a bachelor is over. Settle down and start making babies. That is an order."

Robar Pickwik stared into his grandmother's eyes, and his predicament came home with a thud. He was going to have to find a wife.

"May I call some of my previous women?" It was the last effort he could muster to get the process over with quickly.

His grandmother smiled. "Of course. If they will meet you at the Crossroads, you will be able to choose one of them. Good luck with that. You leave next weekend."

She waved her hand lazily at him in dismissal, and Robar got to his feet. He had some calls to make.

This was not the way that he was planning his luncheon to go. Normally, his nana was very cheerful and reasonable. Something must have struck her to make her turn like this.

All he knew was that he had five days to find a woman willing to meet him at the Crossroads. How

hard could that be?

* * * *

Loreada sighed and leaned back. "I know it is harsh, Arduna, but he needs to find someone. This flitting around will not do him any good. He needs to get on with the rest of his life, and he needs someone at his side."

Her daughter was concerned. "Are you sure that this is the best course of action for him?"

"I was sure when I sent you to the Crossroads, wasn't I?"

"You know you were. Johann is the best man I could have wished

for. Shouldn't he know about this?"

Loreada nodded. "Of course he should, that is why I went to lunch with him yesterday. He is all for his son getting his act together, Arduna. You are the one who has been holding his hand every time he breaks a woman's heart and has to deal with it. Of course, he does not deal with it. He just takes the pat on the head and the shoulder and moves on to the next woman. That can't continue. He can and will be a good husband. He just needs the right woman, and he is not going to find her on your yacht."

Arduna stiffened, and Loreada looked at her daughter with her eyebrow raised.

“Mother, he is a young man with hot blood. He needs to be out and finding females that catch his fancy.”

“If Johann was running around with other women, how would you feel?”

Arduna blinked. “I would be horrified and devastated, but we are a Crossroads match. He wouldn’t do that.”

Loreada smiled grimly at her daughter. “Exactly. I want Robar’s wife to have that security as well.

No woman enjoys knowing that her mate is a whore who gives it away, but knowing that he will be faithful from this moment on is a key point that I cannot stress enough. Your father catted around, and it was only strength of will that kept me from killing him.”

Arduna shook her auburn head. She had her father's features and his sense of propriety. It was Loreada's burden to try and control her only child, as well as her sole grandchild. She was not going to be walking the earth forever, so it was time to make sure that Robar settled down with a good woman.

He was a good man with a good soul; he just needed a woman who made him want to be a better man, all day, every day. She hoped that the Crossroads could work its magic, because she was at the end of her rope. The boy needed far more help than she could offer, and hopefully, he would get it.

Chapter Two

Mina sat in the transporter's office and knit her fingers together. "Is everything all right?"

Theo looked up with a grin. "It is better than all right. I will just have to catalogue all of the samples that your family provided. Fortunately, we have an hour."

She bit her lip. "Is this normal?"

"No. Normally, we don't get samples from cousins, aunts, uncles and ex-boyfriends." Theo raised his dark brows. "It is not usual that we get an entire community

participating.”

“I guess they want me gone.”

Theo paused. “Don’t think of it like that; think of it that these people, including men who were in your life at one point, have all given something of themselves to find you a true mate. That shows affection that goes far beyond casual. These people care about you. You are taking them with you, and your attempts to find a mate will be cheered on from this realm.”

Mina smiled and sat up a little. “Thank you, that makes me feel better.”

“It is the truth. I have sent close to a hundred folks to the Crossroads, and this is the largest donation I have ever been given. They love you far more than you know.”

Tears surged into her eyes. She breathed in deeply to stop the flow and smiled brightly instead. She was good at smiling. When you caused trouble wherever you went, it was second nature to pretend that nothing had gone awry.

“I know that I am loved; I also know that I am a goof. Did you know that I actually lit my last date on fire?”

Theo paused. "Fire?"

"I was just reaching out to take his hand, and I elbowed the server passing us, he bumped into Larry, and Larry knocked the centerpiece candle over on himself, starting a paraffin fire on his lapel."

Theo was staring at her, aghast. "That must have been a coincidence."

"Accident, coincidence, jinx, disaster. I have had all of these tags and more."

"And yet, you have more of a lust for life than any woman I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. Your list of hobbies is endless, and you

participate not only in your community but your family and wilderness activities.”

Mina shrugged. “It comes with being from a social species.”

Theo smiled softly. “And you are one of the first ocelots that I have ever transported. If you like, we can get in position and I can check on the location of the gateway. It is coming closer a little more rapidly than I anticipated.”

“You can feel it?”

“Yes. For us, we wait until it arrives. It is only our guild master who can summon the gateways at will. I would not wish her power

on anyone. Her efforts to restrain herself take up a good portion of her day.”

Mina wrinkled her nose and picked up her luggage. “That sounds tricky.”

“Wielding that much power is tricky. I wish Kris luck. She needs it.”

With all the paperwork that required her signature taken care of, she stood on the spot that Theo Yeoman had marked out for her.

“I am correct; it is coming quickly. Stand there; I will prepare to open the gateway. You have your charm?”

Mina lifted her wrist where the small disc dangled.

“You will be meeting Teal and Tony when you arrive. They are the swan and raven. They guard access to the Crossroads. Don’t light them on fire.” Theo grinned and waved his hands, a column of light started at Mina’s feet and rose rapidly until it swamped over her head and the light was bathing her completely.

The gleam slowly faded, and she was now standing on a stone floor with two dark-haired guardians looking at her with wary welcome.

Mina inclined her head. “Hello, I am Mina Lancaster.”

The woman smiled, "Mina, you are early."

She bit her lip nervously. "The portal arrived ahead of schedule."

"Please, come this way. I am Teal, this is my husband Tony." The woman made the introductions with a wave of her hand.

"Pleased to meet you both." Mina clutched her bag to her and white knuckled it out the door.

"You will be staying at the hostel for female predators?"

Mina nodded. "Yes. I didn't want to waste any of the money that was collected to send me here."

Teal nodded with a smile. "I

understand. Please, ask any questions that cross your mind. We were just getting your visit organized, so you caught us a little flat footed.”

“Oh, I thought it had all been arranged.” She bit her lip.

“It has been, but we thought we still had an hour until your arrival. I guessed that the portal was early.”

Mina swallowed and nodded. “It suddenly showed up. The transporter panicked and sent me through before I could make up my mind to run for it.”

“Don’t worry about it. It is all set up. We have two predators who are

probably leaving today. You will have the hostel all to yourself in short order.”

Mina followed Teal with a sense of hope. “Oh good.”

Teal cleared her throat. “We have been warned of your special circumstances.”

“Polite way of putting it. I am a jinx, a klutz. No man can stay in my vicinity and not suffer an injury.”

“I know. Chuck is being briefed as we speak, so are the staff at the café and restaurant.”

“It is so embarrassing.”

“No, it is inconvenient. We will make sure that your actions do not

ruin your chances to find happiness." Teal put her arm around Mina's shoulders.

Mina felt like laughing and bawling at the same time. "How can you be so calm about it?"

"We are professionals. We are here to design and maintain an atmosphere in which you can meet your match. However it is going to happen, we will support you. Oh, and we also have a full-time medic on hand. Lee is ready for anything at a moment's notice."

A bit of Mina's soul unfurled happily. "How long do I have here?"

Teal smiled. "As long as you need. There has been no limit to the amount of time you are here. The involvement of your entire community has earned you an open account that will provide you with every resource we have at our disposal."

"I don't want you to go to any trouble."

"It is too late. We love working with special cases. Yours is the most peculiar we have seen in some time."

Mina groaned. "Nothing like feeling special to make one's day."

"It is going to be fine. Nothing to

it. Just relax and let your senses guide you. They are your best determination of what is right for you.”

Mina nodded and hiked her bag over her shoulder. She had clothing selected that would leave no doubt as to her availability. “Right, well, I had better get in a hunting frame of mind.”

“Good. Well, here is the hostel. It is gender and predation locked. We want all of our guests to feel secure. I will show you where to put your things, and then, we will continue our tour.”

Mina nodded eagerly and asked,

“Should I change first?”

“Sure. That way, I can leave you at the Crossed Star after the tour and you can get to work.”

It was set; she was going to do this. With her shoulders straight, she followed Teal's lead and checked into her temporary home. The possibilities of her future life began tonight.

She hoped that she was ready for it.

Chapter Three

Mina smiled shyly as another male showed interest in her. Women surrounded him, his dark auburn hair had an adorable curl and his eyes were a solid leaf green.

She quickly turned her back to him, sure that a male so pretty with all those women could not possibly be interested in her.

“Another strawberry margarita, Chuck.”

“Coming right up, Mina.” He inclined his head and went to work.

Four days in the Crossroads made

her a regular and known to almost everyone whose path she crossed. Chuck knew her preferences for beverages, the café prepared her meals with no more than a cursory confirmation and Lee stopped by the predator hostel to play checkers every afternoon. It was a wonderfully safe routine.

With the drink in hand, she turned to watch the handsome male and his harem. “Oh-my-god-excuse-me.”

The pink and red that had looked so tempting in the glass looked less so while running down his shirt.

“It is fine, I am sure that it will

wash out.” He tried to keep the charm on, but his bevy of women surrounded him and coaxed him back and away from Mina.

She stopped and whispered, “I am sure it will.”

Turning back to Chuck, she met his amused gaze. “Another please.”

Chuck got to work, but he had to ask, “Are you tagging him for later capture?”

“No, just to mark and release him back into the wild. He needs to be with his own kind. The pretty ones.”

“Aw, Mina, you are very attractive. Don’t let anyone tell you

otherwise.”

“Wrong, Chuck. I am cute. There is a world of difference between attractive and cute. I accept it.” She saluted him with the drink he handed to her and took a sip. “Wonderful as always, Chuck. Are the strawberries from Teebie’s garden?”

“Of course. Where else could we get such freshness on a daily basis?”

Mina didn’t have an answer, so she sipped again and then turned with the intention of returning to her table.

He really should not have been standing there when she turned

around.

The hot pink colour of the drink absorbed into the starched white of his shirt and spread from his collarbone down toward his navel. She looked up and met his gaze for a moment before she did what her instincts urged her to do. She ran as far and as fast as she could.

* * * *

Robar looked down at the sticky mess that used to be one of his favourite shirts and then at the retreating figure of the woman with blood-red hair and a pert little nose.

“I am guessing that she was in a hurry.” His absent comment caught the attention of the bartender.

“She is usually in a hurry. I can get you some club soda for that.”

Robar sighed. “Never mind. I will just discard it. What is her problem?”

The serpentine bartender scowled. “She doesn’t have a problem; she is just a little uncoordinated when she gets close to a male. If you are interested, just stay at arm’s length.”

“I hardly know if I am interested or not. How could I be if I can’t get close enough to her to determine

anything?"

The bartender shrugged. "Follow your instincts. I have seen your little entourage, and I will guess that you have just determined that none of them are mate material."

Robar jolted. "How can you know that?"

"This is not my first rodeo. I have seen men like you come here with old flames, hoping to rekindle something into a blaze. It never works." The bartender nodded. "Can I get you something?"

"No. I will head out into the woods and go for a run. This night is a total write-off."

“The north woods are usually pretty empty at this time of night. You should have plenty of cover for a safe run.”

Robar scowled and plucked at his shirt. “Thanks for that.”

Maintaining dignity while being covered in frapped fruit was difficult, but he straightened his shoulders and left the bar. A night run was just what he needed.

* * * *

Mina crouched in the trees and watched the nightlife beneath her. A few large predators crept past on their way to a tryst, but Mina kept

her vigil up high in the trees.

It was rather sad that the only place she felt in control lately was inside the body of her beast.

She didn't know what it was that made her so damned awkward and dangerous when the opposite sex was around, but it was much easier to deal with the world in general when she was in her fur.

Her ocelot form came with excellent vision, a sense of smell that was sometimes inconvenient and a set of claws that were still less dangerous than her human form.

Hiding up in a tree was an attractive option every day of her

life, and she was pleased to be able to indulge it.

She watched the traffic beneath her, and her beast perked up when a male fox sauntered through the path worn by claws and paws.

Mina tensed and watched him. His pointed ears, bushy tail and confident prance were hypnotic. He sprinted off down the path, and she fought the urge to follow him.

It was an hour later when he sashayed back into her field of vision. He sat and yawned, stretching his body out and flicking his tail.

Mina couldn't resist. He was

about her size and she wanted to play.

With smooth moves, she came down from the tree and sat across from him. He blinked and cocked his head.

Mina lowered her head and raised her haunches, lashing her tail playfully.

He mimicked her, and she pounced on him, knocking him flat before she streaked through the woods and into the meadow.

He made a high-pitched bark as he chased after her, and she quickly changed direction, leapt into the air and twisted, landing on his fluffy

tail.

He yelped and stopped suddenly.

Mina jumped to the side and crouched low while her playmate made sure that his tail was still attached. He mimicked her and his ears went back. She watched his nose twitch, and the moment he jumped, she met him in mid-air.

Her paws were soft, claws held in as she wrestled with him. It was fun to pit beast against beast, but when they were both done rolling around, she flopped on her belly and yawned.

He sat next to her and rubbed his body against hers, using her for

support as he yawned and blinked sleepily.

Mina was happy. Sure, the next day she was going to be back in her human form and looking for a man who could dodge the bad luck that she brought with every step and gesture, but tonight, her beast had a playmate that smelled like musk and strawberries.

For this one piece of time, life was good.

She sighed and enjoyed the feel of the warm body against her own. His fur wasn't as soft as hers, but the differences made it more enjoyable.

Mina wriggled against him and closed her eyes for just a moment, pretending that this was normal and she could enjoy the sensation whenever she pleased.

After a few minutes, the feeling of a sharply pointed muzzle lapping at her made her sit up and blink at her companion. He licked at her neck and cheek. She backed away in confusion. She had just wanted to play, and he was starting something else entirely.

When he started to shift into his human form, she ran. Being faced with a naked male was off the agenda for the evening.

He shouted after her, but she kept running until she reached the safety of the predator hostel. She shifted to human in order to open the door and quickly ducked inside. She was sharing the hostel with two wolves and a lioness, but none of them were home from the rest of the Crossroads yet.

Her room was a quiet haven. If she could, she would not leave it for the disasters awaiting her outside its confines.

Mina sighed and smiled at the small moment of happiness that she had just experienced. It seemed forever since she had just played

with another shifter.

She hoped that the fox wasn't good at matching people to their animals. She was looking forward to another romp through the woods but would not have the nerve if he knew who she was.

Mina slipped on a robe and headed into the shower. A quick scrub and a good night's sleep and she would be up for the following day's trials. It was a hope that she would cling to until it was proven to be wrong once again.

Optimism was as much a part of her life as the damage that she inflicted on the men in her life.

Somehow, they kept a fairly even appearance in her life, hope and disaster, neck and neck.

Chapter Four

The knock on her door had Mina jumping in panic. “Yes?”

The door opened and Teal entered. “Mina, we have been observing you for the last few days, and you have a problem.”

Mina tucked her shirt into her jeans and sighed. “I believe that I mentioned that when I first came to the Crossroads.”

“This goes beyond social awkwardness. You have magic sticking to you, and you need to get it sorted.” Teal’s expression was

serious.

Mina snorted. "Magic? Shifters don't deal with magic."

"How do you think you got here? Magic makes us change our forms, and it also has been flaring around you in an evil aura every time you get near a man."

"You can see it?"

"Not me...Chuck. He has been watching you in an effort to help diagnose your problem."

"Well, that explains his attentive nature."

"He is that attentive to anyone that he and his mate get along with."

Mina quickly ran a brush through her hair and put it up in a ponytail. "Okay. Where are we going to get me a diagnosis and how much extra will it cost?"

"Nothing extra. When you were granted access to the Crossroads, it was with the assumption that we would be able to help you find a match. In your current condition, that isn't likely."

Teal smiled brightly. "Come along. Teebie makes the most wonderful breakfast. You can eat there."

The thought of breakfast brought her to attention more than

anything previously mentioned. Sure, she knew that there had to be another influence somewhere that was helping her clumsiness along, but she hadn't thought that it was external.

Fully dressed, she left the hostel at Teal's side, walking through the early morning in the Crossroads. Shipments of supplies were being trundled in to the café and restaurant. Jim was bringing a stack of pallets to the bar, and he waved cheerfully at Mina as they passed.

"I see you have made a few friends since you have been here." Teal was chuckling.

“One or two. I make friends easily as long as they don’t have any designs on me romantically.”

“I see. Well, you will enjoy meeting Teebie then. She is the newest addition to the management of the Crossroads.”

“What kind of a shifter is she?”

“One of a kind, my dear. One of a kind.”

Curious, Mina looked forward to meeting a specialist in matters of magic. If her problem was caused by outside influences, she was eager to find the cause.

The Open Heart Bed and Breakfast was prim, proper and

excellently maintained. The door swung open to admit them, and Teal led her inside and to the left where a table was set and a coffee carafe was waiting for them.

Mina blinked in surprise as a woman in a navy day dress with a white apron stepped forward. Her blue-purple skin would be eye catching under any circumstances, but here at the Crossroads, it was truly extraordinary.

“Welcome to the Open Heart, Mina. I am Teebie.”

“Thank you for the welcome, Teebie. I am grateful for any insight you can give me on this matter.”

Teebie gestured for her and Teal to sit. "This will be easier if you relax and have something to eat. Your aura will settle, and I will be able to pinpoint the spike points."

No one had to tell Mina twice. She took two muffins onto her plate and poured coffee for all three of them.

Teebie took her cup with an inclination of her head and a graceful lift of her hand. Cream and sugar measured themselves into her cup without being touched physically.

Mina fixed her own coffee and bit into one of the muffins. She

groaned at the light and buttery taste of the blueberry muffin. "These are amazing."

"Thank you, it is my aunt's recipe."

"It is wonderful. My compliments to both you and your aunt." Mina smiled happily and munched away.

Teebie grinned, her teeth white against the vivid colouration of her skin. "I will tell her. Now, just relax and tell me about the first time you noticed a problem with the opposite sex."

Mina thought back and reached for another muffin. "I was fifteen. I

had been asked out on my second date of my entire life, and it was a complete disaster.”

“Describe it.”

“Daryll was meeting me at the library, and his bike not only had a flat tire, but the welds of his bicycle gave way and it fell apart on the way. He was a wreck when he arrived, so we went for ice cream. He developed a violent lactose intolerance that kicked in after he had the first few bites. I never went out with him again.”

Teal winced. “It sounds unfortunate.”

“At least Daryll didn’t break

anything. He had had a crush on me for a while but had only just gotten up the nerve to ask me out after Thomas was bragging that he was my first date.”

Teebie’s eyes were glowing a strange gold. “Who was Thomas?”

“Thomas was a shy guy who kept to himself. We went to a movie and a dinner with a group of kids from the community centre, but the next time he asked me out, I had to say no. He was just too creepy, always staring into my eyes and telling me that I was the woman of his dreams.”

Teebie whispered, “What

happened to him?"

"His family moved away halfway through the school year. I never saw him in person again, though he has appeared in my nightmares over the years."

That got the attention of both women. As one, they said, "Really?"

"Yeah. Anytime I dream of another man, he appears and twists the dream into something painful for the male who has interest in me."

Mina could feel a warmth spilling over her and knew that Teebie was the cause. Her memories were

being gently turned over, one by one. Mina kept herself calm with pouring coffee and eating muffins.

Half an hour passed, and finally, Teebie jerked her head up and smiled. "I think I have it. It will require more research, but I should have a prescription for you sometime today."

"A what?"

"A means to break the curse, for an actual curse is what is causing you this problem." Teebie blinked and held up her hand. A small medallion appeared in her palm. "This will show you when the curse activates. A small glow will let you

know when the effect is occurring. At least you will be aware of it until I can do some research with Teal and come up with a treatment plan.”

The small medallion had a strange glyph on it. When Mina took it, it flared brightly for a moment. “What does that symbol mean?”

Teebie smiled. “It is the djinn word for *see*. It is one of the only glyphs I could use that would not interfere or alter the magic that is wrapped around you. Can you see it yet?”

Mina looked down and her eyes

widened. She was wrapped in energy from ankle to shoulder. It was on the outside of her skin in a web of light. "Is this on me all the time?"

Teebie nodded. "It activates when someone shows interest in you. The more intense the attraction, the more violent the spur of energy. Does it ever happen when you are shifted?"

Blinking, Mina shook her head. "No. When I am in my other form, I am just me. I can interact with other people's beasts without incident."

"So, the curse is attached to your

human form. That is good. It means there is room to skim out from under it. I will try to find a cure, but..."

"What?" Teal asked it.

"It would be easier if I could see it in action. Has there been any male here with interest in you that was answered by a show of disaster?" Teebie's expression had all the seriousness of an investigating doctor.

Mina bit her lip. "Um. There was a man last night. I didn't really meet him, but he was the recipient of two spilled drinks that I had been holding."

A masculine voice spoke from the doorway. "It is a good thing that I like strawberries."

Mina froze as she watched the attractive male from the night before enter the dining room and fix himself a plate and a cup of coffee.

"Robar, I did wonder at the décor on your shirt when you returned." Teebie smiled slyly.

"It was my own fault. I should never sneak up on a lovely lady in the crowded confines of a bar." He raised his coffee to her. "Good morning, miss."

Mina felt the scarlet colour

flooding her cheeks. "Good morning."

Teal made the introductions. "Mina Lancaster, I would like to introduce Robar Pickwik."

Robar got to his feet and bowed slightly. "I am pleased to meet you, Mina."

He exhaled on her name, and she felt a warmth run up her spine. "Nice to meet you, Robar."

He grinned and sat back down, "Teebie, what do you need me to do?"

"Be attracted to Mina."

"Done." He grinned and lifted his coffee to his lips.

For the first time in her life, Mina saw the spike of energy that shot out from around her body, and she watched it strike his hand, causing a cascade of hot coffee to nearly emasculate him.

He jumped up, and the table rattled as he brushed at his trousers.

Mina's mortification knew no bounds, but learning that it wasn't simply proximity to her that was causing the problem gave her a sense of relief. "I am sorry about that."

"No worries, Mina. I have plenty of clothing. Teebie, did you see what you needed to?"

Teebie grinned. "I did indeed. Thank you, Robar."

He smiled. "Pardon me, ladies. I will return shortly."

Mina watched him go and then asked, "Has that happened every time?"

Teebie waved her hand and a huge tome appeared in front of her. "Yes. I am guessing that Thomas was an untrained mage. It would explain why his parents moved him away instead of forcing him to remove his curse. Many magical families try to ignore the power until they are brought to heel by the guilds."

“Were they on the run, do you think?”

Teal shrugged. “Stranger things have happened. If his first spell was a curse, he would have been from one of the darker guilds and that might have frightened his parents.”

“Don’t the children belong to the same guild as their parents?”

“Not really. They can pop randomly just like shifters do. It could be that his parents were unprepared for his talent and tried to hide it from their guild and his.”

Mina blinked. She hadn’t thought of that. Sure, it was not uncommon for a shifter family to have a

member who did not match the rest of them. Mythical animals popped randomly, and ancestors chipped in their genes now and then to bring an ancient creature back into modern day. Mina's aunt Reyna was a turtle, as were her cousins. They fit in just fine at the ocelot events. She had never thought of how it would work with magical humans.

Teebie opened the huge tome, and she slowly turned the pages, looking for something in particular.

Mina looked at Teal. "What now?"

"Go about your day. I am sure

she will call you if she finds something.”

Mina got to her feet. “Thank you for your help, Teal, Teebie. Just knowing that it isn’t all me has been a tremendous help.”

Teebie looked up, winked and said, “The charm will let you know when I find something.”

Teal reached for another muffin. “I will come and find you if the charm doesn’t get your attention.”

Mina sighed. She was being dismissed. “All right. I am off to help Lee with inventory. I will see you later. Thanks again.”

She grabbed a muffin for the road

and headed out of the bed and breakfast with a lightening of her heart taking hold and elevating her mood. She was getting help, and with luck, they would find a cure for the disaster that followed her everywhere.

She could hope.

Chapter Five

Robar looked around when he returned to the dining room. "Where did she go?"

Teebie didn't look up from the huge book she was flipping through. "She is off to engage in her normal daily activities so that she won't go nuts while waiting for me to find a cure for her condition."

He sighed and sat down, pulling more muffins onto his plate and carefully pouring more coffee. "What is her condition?"

Teal smiled, "She is under a curse that has an effect on any man who pursues her. They suffer a series of annoying incidences designed to drive them off."

Robar sat back and nodded. "That would describe the effect I have experienced. The more I am interested in her, the more violent the shock of whatever happens to distract me."

Teebie looked up and nodded. "Good. Do you feel anything else?"

"There is a feeling of hostility that washes over me. It isn't from Mina but rather from something or someone near her."

The djinn nodded. "That is what I am looking up. I believe that her first boyfriend was an untrained curse master. If he didn't know what he was doing, he would not have placed an expiration on the curse. I need to find a way around it."

Robar smiled. "Good. Whatever you need to effect a cure, I will do it."

Teal grinned, "I thought you were here to get out easily with a woman you could dismiss as soon as you were back in the human world?"

He blushed. "I apologize for my

attitude. I underestimated the effect of the Crossroads. None of the women I invited here are suitable mates, and I know that now."

Teal pressed her query. "And how do you feel about Mina?"

"She is definitely attractive to my beast, and my instincts are to get as close to her as I can. I never understood how my parents could have been content with just each other, but after being in the Crossroads, where shifters can be shifters, it makes sense that our instincts guide us."

Teebie smiled and kept reading.

“The human world confuses shifters. You end up wanting what you see in the media and that is not what your kind needs. Even the families who force matings forget that your inner beast guides you, protects you and supports you. When you seek a mate, you need to offer it a companion for life.”

He had to ask, “How do you know so much about it?”

“Ah, my grandmother and my great aunts were shifters. My mother married a djinn because she knew he was the one. My great aunt waited until her inner beast had its true mate and that is why I

am here. She is learning to live in the human world with him right now, so I have taken over her bed and breakfast.”

The immense age that she seemed to be referencing was surprising. “How old is your aunt?”

“Old enough. My grandmother was a gryphon who died defending her town and her children.”

“A mythical beast?”

“Unless you know of a different kind of gryphon. All the women on my grandmother’s side were mythical. And in case you wonder, no, most of my cousins are not blue. I am a throwback.”

She looked up at him and winked before she resumed her studies.

Robar watched her as she muttered under her breath and stroked the pages. She was using more than just her eyes as she rifled through the book. There was the gleam of energy in her eyes.

Teal sighed. "Well, I am glad that you are enjoying the process at last."

He tilted his head. "Enjoy is a strong term. I have surrendered to it. My preconceptions have been shattered and I am ready to do it properly."

"Excellent. I am going to be

collecting ten bucks from Tony. I told him you would not be stubborn enough to make it over a week without coming around.”

He snorted. “You bet on me?”

“You were very obnoxiously intent that you would be able to make your selection and return to your family unchanged by finding a mate. Even Tony knew that you would change, we just didn’t know when.”

Ruefully, he poured another cup of coffee. “Do the women change?”

“Of course, but they usually pick up on it sooner. Their beasts rise the moment that eligible mates are

nearby, and they slap the inner human around to their way of thinking.”

A basket floated in from the kitchen and settled next to Teal. The Crossroads guardian chuckled. “And on that note, I am on my way. Teebie, call me if you can’t get a hold of Mina.”

The proprietor waved her off and kept flipping through the pages of the book.

Teal patted Robar on the shoulder as she left with her basket.

He sat and watched as Teebie moved through the book but didn’t seem to get any further into the

tome. She flipped a page every ten seconds but the book remained divided down the centre.

He got a little dizzy and stood up. "Please pardon me. I believe that a walk is on my agenda."

She grinned and waved him off. "Have a nice time. The shifter's meadow is not usually occupied this time of day."

Taking the hint, he left and headed to the shifter's meadow where he could shift during daylight hours and no one would think anything of it.

* * * *

Mina crouched down in the field full of daisies and watched bees and butterflies go about their daily routines. The inventory had taken five minutes, so Mina had the rest of the time until lunch to enjoy being out and about as her other self.

Her tail twitched and her nose picked up on every subtle scent that wafted through the meadow. When she smelled musk and blueberries, she lifted her head and sat up slightly, watching the male fox as he chased a butterfly through the meadow. That fluffy tail of his was far too tempting.

She crouched low with her tail lashing until he was within a few feet of her, and then, she pounced, rolling him over until he yelped in surprise.

Unsure of how he would take her overtures to play, she stepped away and sat primly, her tail thudding rhythmically on the grass behind her.

He sat down, mimicking her. His head tilted from side to side, and he slowly got to his feet, coming toward her. His feet were placed carefully, daintily in the grass and flower stalks that her tumble had flattened.

She sat warily as his pointed muzzle approached hers, and her eyes crossed when he sniffed at her forehead before working his way down her cheeks and neck. The soft fur of her coat ruffled as he exhaled and inhaled, taking in her scent.

Mina managed to hold still until he reached her lower back. When he got too close to her tail, she growled.

He froze and then continued.

That was it. She yowled and swatted him with her claws in. He let out a yip and jumped at her.

It was so peculiar for her to be attacked by anything that she

didn't react for a moment. When she finally was in a reacting mode, her claws came out, and she swiped him across the shoulder and ran from him when he jerked back in surprise.

She streaked through the meadow, into the forest and up into the tree line. She jumped up the fourth tree she passed and headed toward the sun.

Mina huddled on the highest branch that would support her, and she heard the low growl coming from her throat.

Her fox sat at the foot of her tree and yipped.

She snarled. As she watched, he shifted and her heart skipped a beat.

Robar was standing naked and completely at ease at the base of the tree. "I apologize for jumping you like that. Please come down."

She blinked and slowly crept down the tree, staring up at him from her vantage point near his knees. He crouched and reached out to stroke her.

The feel of his hands moving through her fur made her eyes narrow, and she let out a low sigh. It was wonderful.

"I don't know what your name is,

but would you like to go to dinner with me?"

She opened her eyes wide. Taking her courage into her hands, she shifted into her human form, kneeling across from him with his hands still in her hair, his fingers behind her ears.

"I think that it might be dangerous, Robar."

"Mina!" He blinked and sat back.

"I know. You have changed your mind about dinner now." She sighed and put her hands over his, removing his grip and putting his hand back on his thighs.

"No, it isn't that. I just didn't

expect your other form to be so... perfect." His smile was warm, and she stared into his eyes, looking for truth.

She warmed. "It is just my fur form. It lets me get around. Yours is very elegant."

"And you are exceedingly graceful."

There was a flash from her wrist, and she heard a creak of wood. In an instant, she flung herself onto Robar; the collapsing branch missed him by inches.

He blinked and smiled slowly. "Thank you for your defense of my person."

Her body was plastered against his, her breasts flat against his chest and a hot length rapidly firming against her thigh.

“Um...it was no trouble. I could see that one coming, so to speak.”

Robar had wrapped his arms around her and he slowly stroked the line of her spine.

The slow stroke made her arch against him belly to belly, it was difficult to ignore the nudity of their human forms.

Mina stared at him and slowly lowered her lips to his. A moment before she made contact, a rainbow burst across their faces; the charm

she had threaded onto her wristband was lit up and sparkling. Blushing, she moved carefully and parted them.

“I am being paged, Robar. Are you still interested in dinner?”

He gracefully sat up, pressed her knuckles to his lips and winked. “I will brace myself for whatever comes.”

It wasn't the most romantic declaration, but she smiled with delight before she slipped into her four-footed form to run back to the cabana where she had left her clothing.

He was willing to risk himself to

have dinner with her, knowing where the danger lay. It was the nicest thing he could have said.

Chapter Six

Giddy described Mina's mood as she returned to the Open Heart.

Teebie was on her feet with the book cradled in her arms as she paced back and forth.

“You rang?”

Teebie jerked her head up and smiled. “Yes. Please, have a seat. I have found a way to break the curse or at least bend it so that it doesn't have the devastating effect that it has been having up until now.”

Mina rubbed her neck. “Why

can't we break it?"

"Because the person who cast it probably had no idea what he was doing. We need to find him and that can take time. The curse masters don't give out their membership locations gladly."

Mina was surprised. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Did you ever hear from him again after he moved?"

"He tried to friend me online a few years ago, but I didn't agree to it."

Teebie perked up. "Really? That will make things much easier."

The djinn propped the book open

on the table, using a coffee cup as a bookmark. She raised her hand and a laptop appeared in her grip. "Here, logon."

"We can get Wi-fi here?"

Teebie grinned, "Well, *I* can. Now, go and see if you can find him on the network."

Mina logged in and checked for him. To her surprise, there was another friend request from him waiting for her. "He has asked me to friend him again."

"Do it. I will be able to use the connection to find him and get him targeted for a reversal proposal."

"Will I have to see him?"

Teebie shook her head. "No. It will be handled via the guilds."

"Excellent. So, what do I have to do now?" she finished with the laptop and slid it to Teebie.

"Now, we need to have a serious talk." Teebie turned and faced her, extending her blue hands to Mina.

Mina slipped her hands into Teebie's grip. "What is it?"

"You are a virgin, correct?"

She blushed. "I am. I haven't been able to get close enough to change it."

"Of course. Well, you will have to change that in order to expand the field to protect your mate. That is

the nature of this curse. It is to protect you from the interference of any other male, whether his interest be violent or sensual in nature. The more intense his affection, the more violent the repulsion."

"So?"

"So, if you make the first move, and, in fact, make all the moves, your partner will not come to harm but will, in fact, be included in the protection offered."

"What?"

"The counter-spell is called *Virgin's Prize*. It will protect you and your first lover against all

curses from the moment of consummation. Now, you merely need to find the man you want to protect.”

Robar walked into the Open Heart at that moment and leaned in the doorway. “Am I interrupting?”

Mina looked at him, the column of his throat exposed and leading to the trail of skin displayed by his open shirt. The jeans he wore were tight but not constricting.

Mina asked Teebie, “What if the male I pick isn’t my mate?”

“He will simply be curse-resistant for the rest of his life, as will you.” Teebie glanced between them with

a smile.

“Do I have to tell him the details?”

Robar was listening curiously.

“It would be wise if you want his cooperation, and you will need it.”

Mina winced. Yes, she would have to get some cooperation if she had to do all the work. “All right.”

Teebie looked at her and turned to Robar. “We need a bit of privacy here. Could you give us a few minutes?”

He looked befuddled but nodded. “I will go for a walk to the meditation centre and back.”

Teebie smiled brightly. “That

should be fine.”

The moment he was out the door, the djinn sighed. “Well, since you are staying at the hostel, I am going to offer you a room for this purpose. It will have restraints for him and a lack of items that can fly around and damage him. I need to mark you for the spell to take hold, so hold out your wrists.”

“So you are casting a spell to counteract a curse?” She still held her hands out, wrists up without question. Something about Teebie was very trustworthy.

“Yes. My enchantment is going to go blood deep.” Teebie smiled,

slowly wrapped her hands around Mina's wrists and she sharply dug her thumbnails into the vulnerable skin.

Power surged through Mina's body. Fire, energy and a hunger that had just flirted around the edges of her senses for her entire life spilled through every cell in her system.

She heard Teebie through the roaring in her ears. "The power is in you now, and when you complete the counter-spell, it will push the curse off your flesh and away from your partner as well."

"So, all this power is going to

come out?" She blinked as the sparks faded from her vision.

"Sex always releases energy, Mina. Sometimes it is a rush, a gradual waning, and occasionally, if you are very lucky, it will be a starburst that connects you to the one who will be yours alone."

It sounded wonderful, and as the power simmered in her bloodstream, she wished for Robar to return. Her fox would be the first man in her life and body. She was nowhere near his class, but she was sure that he wouldn't turn up a chance to sleep with her.

"Don't sell him short, Mina.

Robar has come to the Crossroads to find a mate, the same as you. Yes, he was sent by family and you were sent by your community, but you both have had situations that you needed to overcome before you can accept what your instincts are telling you.”

“How do I...” Mina blushed hot and leaned forward.

Teebie quickly offered her a basic outline that included instruction on how to manage the manacles without too much fuss. “When it comes to dealing with him, let him tell you what he wants and you can act on it.”

“I thought that I had to be the one doing all the work.”

“You are, but he can offer as much direction as you are willing to take.”

They both jumped a little as Robar returned. There must have been something in their gazes, because he suddenly became wary. “Is everything all right?”

Mina looked to the djinn and listened to the singing in her blood and got to her feet. “I have something I would like to ask you, Robar.”

He took her hand and walked toward the stairs. “What is it,

Mina?"

"Would you have sex with me?"
She bit her lips.

To say he was startled was a gross understatement. His eyes turned into hot bronze orbs that stared into her own. "Yes, I will."

"Right now? With you restrained?"

He blinked rapidly. "Right now?"

She exhaled in relief when it was the timing and not the restraint that caused him to pause. "Yes. Teebie said she had a room upstairs for me – us."

"Why the rush?"

"I want to stop the curse and

keep you safe. That can only happen if we engage the spell that Teebie primed in me."

Despite his questioning, he was leading her up the stairs. When they arrived at the upper floor, there was only one room.

Robar blinked. "I swear that my room was off and to the left."

Mina giggled. "I am guessing that Teebie didn't want to wreck the mood by confusing us."

He inclined his head. "Well then, with one choice, shall you lead the way?"

She sucked in a deep breath and opened the door, stepping inside to

seduce her way into a new and free dating life. She was going to bungle this on the way, but as long as she made it to actual penetration, the spell would be released and the men in her life would no longer be at risk.

Mina just had to keep her nerve and get through shackling the most attractive man she had seen in years and crawling on top of him. What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter Seven

The bed was huge, swathed in crimson, and the manacles gleamed against the dark fabric in the bright room. A door to one side led to a bathroom, and once she had explored, Mina returned to Robar's side. She looked up at him, and he said the one thing that caused her heart to swell with grateful affection.

“Mina, what do you need?”

She paused as nine different options ran through her mind. Finally, she settled for, “I need you

to tell me what to do so that I don't wreck this."

"Is it your first time?"

Looking anywhere but at him was not an option. The only other thing in the room was the bed. "It is. With this...condition of mine, getting close to foreplay ended up with broken limbs on the part of my partner."

He winced. "What happened?"

"It involved a car door, a moped and a skateboarder." She shuddered at the memory of the snap of the femur. She still could not figure out how it had happened. The arm she could

figure out. The skateboarder had fallen on it.

Robar smiled, "Well, the first thing we need to do is get undressed. I will go first, and you can go when you are ready."

She froze as he shrugged out of his shirt and dropped it carelessly on the floor. Mina sat on the edge of the bed and watched him as he kicked off his shoes and flicked away his socks.

The skin of his torso was smooth with a red line beginning low on his belly and trailing into his jeans. When he unsnapped the denim and eased it over his hips, she held her

breath.

His erection was long, straight and it bobbed invitingly as he finished removing his clothes. Without asking, he crept past her and positioned himself near the shackles. "Ready when you are, Mina."

His erection pointed toward the ceiling, and his body was taut but relaxed.

She shivered and slowly reached for the chain and cuff nearest her.

"It will be easier for you if you let your beast take charge. She knows what she wants." His voice was low and controlled.

Mina looked inside herself and found that he wasn't wrong. "How did you know?"

"Our beasts are always close to the surface when we are naked with another of our kind." Robar smiled.

Her inner cat was flexing and wanted to rub herself all over the naked male next to her.

"What happens if I let her go?"

"Nature will take its course."

"Is that all right?"

He grinned. "It is wonderful. We screw ourselves up with the human instincts. Here at the Crossroads, we learn to trust our inner beasts

again. Let her lead the way.”

Mina nodded and smiled shyly.

“Now, tie me up.”

She was startled into laughing, and before she knew it, he was cuffed to the bed. Her inner animal had done it without consulting her.

Her beast wanted to feel his skin on hers again, so it removed her clothing, tossing them in a tangle over his. With one last move, she unsnapped her hair clip and let her curls tumble around her shoulders. She shook her head and enjoyed the feel of her hair sliding over her skin.

She climbed onto the bed with

him watching her every move. He was right—her inner beast knew just what she wanted.

A low, satisfied growl came from her throat as she climbed over him until her torso was aligned with his and she was holding herself away from him. She leaned in and brushed her lips across his in a slow kiss.

Once he responded to her, she licked his lips with hers. Her beast was leading the way but her human mind was whispering all sorts of ideas. It was rather like hiding behind tissue paper. She could take control anytime she wanted, but

her beast was content to lead.

With slow moves, she brought her arms in and straddled his torso, letting his cock rub against her sex as she stroked his shoulders and chest. Her opening got slick and wet as she moved against him. Every stroke of her tongue against his sent a spiking tension through her.

Her beast wanted to taste him, so she backed up, nuzzling at his neck, nipping him and using her tongue to gauge the flavours of his skin. She enjoyed the flex of his muscles and tendons under her lips. Mina smiled as she learned his flavours,

nipped his nipples before lapping and sucking at them in turn. He groaned, and her smile crept into her soul, knowing that she was making their first time together memorable for him as well.

When she reached his cock, she heard the shackles jingle as his limbs jerked. The flared head was dripping precum, and when she lapped at the salty pearls, the low groan coming from his throat was accompanied by a sharp jerk on the chains.

Her beast smiled and sucked him into her mouth, licking at the tiny opening before pulling back with a

pop.

While she had been exploring him, her own body had been waking gradually. Mina straddled him again, easing the wet head of his cock into her opening and relaxing a little, letting him slip inside.

Robar shuddered, and his eyes narrowed as she engulfed that small bit of him. "Take your time, Mina."

She chuckled and caressed his abs, running her nails over his chest with the lightest touch. "I have waited a long time, Robar. Now is as good as any other time and

better than most.”

Mina flexed her hips, gaining a little more of him. Her body was adjusting to his intrusion, but she could only get him in so far before he wasn't going any further.

His eyes locked with hers. “Take your time, Mina.”

It was a mantra he was whispering to her over and over.

She squirmed in place and felt a sharp ache inside. “This isn't going to work.”

“It will; just rub your clit and follow your instincts.”

It was beyond embarrassing to follow his direction, but as she used

her middle finger to circle her clit, the urge to have him all the way inside her became overpowering. Her breath sighed in and out of her throat as her climax roared up on her.

In a sudden move, Robar arched under her, and she shrieked as her release rode a wave of pain into ripples of pleasure. A second surge caught her by surprise, and power roared out of her and into Robar.

Dimly, she heard the snapping of metal, and Robar's arms came around her as he flipped her to her back.

She stared up at him as he slowly

started to thrust into her. At first, her body registered the friction as pain, but as he continued, pleasure slowly crept into the mix.

He kissed her with the same deliberate attention as his body moved within hers.

Mina returned the kiss and locked her arms around his neck while her legs gripped his hips. She held tight and rocked with him until his motions took on a frenzy that tumbled her along for the ride.

He threaded one hand in her hair and savaged her mouth with his, growling into her mouth while his hips jerked against hers.

A low wave of pulses ran through her channel and sent heat out into her body in low ripples that showed no signs of stopping. She moaned into his mouth, and he held them tightly together as he rolled to his back once again.

Mina was plastered flat against him and copper scented the air. Her sex throbbed and it wasn't simply in memory of pleasure. "Excuse me." She tried to push away from him, but he tightened his hold on her.

"Wait a moment."

Mina scowled. "I need to clean up."

He laughed. "The side effect of making love. There is usually some sort of residue to attend to."

"Blood?"

"Occasionally, especially on the first occasion." He pressed a kiss to her forehead.

What he had said sunk in. "Making love?"

"My kind mates for life once we find our match. You are my match." He stroked her hair and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

Her eyes widened in shock. "You can't be serious!"

He looked offended. "Why not?"

"You are...and I am...and you

need...I am not your type. I saw those other women at the bar, and I am not in their league." She frowned.

"Those women and I had relationships in the human world. We are not compatible when our inner beasts collide. Your ocelot and my fox get along fine." He grinned and pressed another kiss to her forehead.

She had to admit that he had a point. "Fine. I can chase that fluffy tail of yours around indefinitely."

He grinned. "And I will even let you catch it on occasion. Is it really my tail you are after?"

“Well, your tail and you smell like berries.”

“That is because you spilled them on me that first night and today I was eating blueberries.”

Mina blushed. “Oh.”

Sweat was cooling on her body, and she shivered. It was that small motion that made Robar release her.

He slipped out of her and stroked her spine slowly. “Go and take a hot shower. If you like, I will wash your back for you.”

She sat up and took a quick look around. Her body was painted with stripes from rolling back and forth

in her own blood. “Oh my whiskers.”

She bolted out of bed and headed for the bathroom. She heard motion behind her, and she was barely under the hot spray before he was crowding her against the wall and helping her remove traces of their coupling.

Mina leaned back as he massaged her spine and the curve of her butt.

His hands slipped between her thighs and relieved some of the ache that was starting in muscles that hadn't straddled another living being before.

“So, where would you like to go

for lunch?" Robar whispered it in her ear.

Her stomach growled as an answer. "The café would be fine."

He laughed. "I was thinking something more formal for our first meal together."

"Formal can be for dinner. I am in the mood for fries or maybe a salad."

Robar's hands moved around her body and cupped her breasts. "I am in the mood for more of you, but I will wait. I think we need to exchange particulars and the café is as good a spot as any."

She smiled. "Good. Now, let me

out of here and you can have your own run through the water." She turned in his arms and stared up at the clean line of his jaw and the throbbing pulse in his neck.

"Fine, but don't take off without me." Robar laughed.

Mina sighed and slid past him. She wrapped herself in a towel and retreated to the bedroom. She blinked. The sheets were now a pristine white and there was no trace of the previous wreck.

A table set for two with covered dishes on it waited for her.

Her clothing was folded neatly at the foot of the bed but a navy blue

silk and lace negligee was draped over top of it. She took the hint.

When Robar returned, he stopped short, wearing nothing more than a towel and a shocked expression. "What?"

"Apparently, Teebie thought I could benefit from an afternoon in."

He grinned and looked at the table. "What is she serving?"

"I have no idea. There was a note that said we were to place our orders out loud and she would provide."

He smiled and held her chair out for her. She slipped into the seat,

and he helped her place the napkin on her lap.

He sat opposite her and smiled, "I do not recall you wearing that on the way into this room."

"It was waiting for me when I came out. I decided to take the hint."

"Remind me to thank Teebie for it."

She smiled. "I will."

She closed her eyes and muttered her lunch request. There was a ping from the metal, and when she lifted the cover, her fries, ketchup and salad were all huddled together.

Lunch was served.

Chapter Eight

“So, how did you end up here? I was blackmailed.” Robar grinned.

“Ah, well, I was sent here by my family and my entire local shifter community. They held a social to raise funds and each donated a piece of themselves for the transporter.”

She dunked her fry into the ketchup and waved it in the air. “It was the largest single donation on record.”

“What is a social?”

“It is an event where you

purchase a ticket, dance and drink. It is a ticket to a party." She smiled.

"Was it fun?"

"Not particularly. Even my ex-dates participated in an effort to get me to the Crossroads."

He winced. "That must have been embarrassing."

She snickered and waved a fry at him. "No more so than finding that the women you had paid to come here were not suitable candidates for an easy escape."

He raised one auburn eyebrow in surprise. "Fair enough. You are right. I was a little perturbed when I realised that none of them would

be suitable as mates.”

She chuckled. “At least my exes wanted me to find my proper match. If they couldn’t be the love of my life, they wanted me to find it.”

He sat back with a strange look. “You do seem to make friends easily, don’t you?”

She shrugged. “I know. For a wild species that is normally solitary, I am perversely social.”

“It is a good trait. My family throws a lot of dinner parties and attends any number of events.”

Mina suddenly realised that he came from money. “How well off

are you?"

"Well, the Pickwicks are an old family, and my grandmother's line is even older. She's an Alenfleur."

"Well, the Lancasters are an old family, we are simply middle class." She smiled, "My mother's family are Ekhearts. Two steady ocelot lines."

He finished his burger and grinned, "So, do you think our children will be ocelots or foxes?"

"I really don't know. It isn't something I have thought about. Heck, they could even be turtles. I have some in my lineage a few generations back, and they pop up

when you least expect them.” She blinked. Children. Well, she supposed that it was the logical outcome of the sort of activity she had just engaged in. Fortunately, she could not bear more than one child every two years. It would help her keep things in perspective.

“You hadn’t thought about children, had you? Your face just went blank.”

She sighed. “It is just all a little more than I was thinking about. I was concentrating on getting past my gentlemen callers being struck by passing objects or set on fire. I hadn’t thought about what would

happen next.”

Robar laughed. “Understandable. My mother and grandmother confronted me and ordered me to come here. I only thought to find a mate and go home, but now that I have met you, the future seems something that I am very interested in. For example, where would you like to live?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere near a thick forest where I can run and hide when I like.” She finished her fries and moved on to her salad.

“You don’t have a preference for a certain location?”

“No. I will go where my mate is

and make a new territory.”

“Is that traditional in ocelot shifters?” He asked her the question as if he knew the answer.

“No. My family is not traditional in our beast’s sense. We remain with our mates. We don’t simply mate and kick the male out so we can raise our offspring. Both my parents are steady influences in my life, but they want me to strike out on my own.”

“So, we both have strong parents who are shoving us toward a settled life. We have something in common beyond the basics.” Robar smiled and took her hand.

“Apparently.” She finished her salad and tucked everything back under the silver dome.

“Now, how did you come to be the victim of a curse?”

She sighed and sat back. “I didn’t realise that anything was wrong for the longest time.”

“How did you figure it out?”

“It was my senior prom. My date was David Twist, and he was very gallant and cheerful, just what I needed at the time. We were dancing, and one of the spotlights that the gym was using fell and shattered, embedding a piece into his leg that required extraction at

the hospital. It was the fifth date that had ended in trouble.”

“Ah, that would do it. What did you think was causing it?”

“I thought I was a jinx. Unlucky and unlikely to find a man who could survive being near me. My family didn’t believe it; they kept setting me up with any eligible male they could find. I merely kept going on round after round of first dates, all ending in disaster.”

“What caused the curse?”

“Teebie is looking into it, but her theory is that one of the boys that I knew in high school was a curse master and he marked me as his

own.”

“Why couldn’t you ask him to remove the curse?”

“His family moved three months after the first dating disaster. I had no idea what was going on at the time. It never even occurred to me that he could have been a human mage.”

“They are hard to spot.” He chuckled. “Would you care to take an afternoon nap?”

She smiled and felt the aches and pains in her body. “It is a very attractive idea.”

He rose to his feet and discarded the towel.

“Alright, now it is more than an idea.” Mina smiled and got to her feet. “I know an order when I see one.”

He laughed and walked her over to the bed, folding the sheets back before lifting them to allow her to slide in. Instead of walking around to the other side of the bed, he slid in next to her, curling her against him.

“I haven’t napped in the afternoon since I had the flu two years ago.” She babbled as he wrapped his arm around her, cupping her breast in one hand while he tucked his hips against her

buttocks.

He pressed a kiss to her neck. "It is a habit worth rekindling. I can imagine many lazy afternoons with you in my arms, sunlight bathing us in warmth and light."

The idea had merit, and Mina smiled happily at the thought. She did so love to be warm.

"So, what do foxes do for fun?" She murmured it with sleepy satisfaction.

"We run together, play together, race around in the fields." He spoke slowly while his hands moved on the silk that covered her.

"Sounds nice."

“It is. Now, which home shall we go to first, yours or mine?”

“Yours. I can send my people a message.”

“Brave as well as beautiful. I am a lucky man.” His lips moved against her neck.

“You have no idea, and I am not brave, I merely want to get the hard part over with. After meeting your people, everything else will be easy.”

Robar sighed and squeezed her gently. “The women of my family will not be easy, but they will respect your spirit. I will make sure of it.”

It was the last thing spoken between them as they drifted off on dreams of meadows and sunbeams.

Chapter Nine

Her bags were packed and in the room when she woke. The room itself had changed again into what Mina guessed was Robar's original guestroom.

"Are you awake, kitten?" His voice was husky with sleep.

"I am. When did my bags arrive?"

He rolled her to her back and pressed kisses on her jaw and lips until she responded, holding his head and clinging to him with intensity.

He broke their kiss. "About an hour ago. That is when we were switched to this room."

She leaned up and pressed her lips to his again. The freedom to indulge her inclinations without worrying about his wellbeing was a heady sensation.

He groaned and pulled away. "I think this is Teebie's way of telling us that our time at the Crossroads is complete."

Mina wanted to yowl with frustration. "Dang, I wanted to hide here for a while longer."

Robar stroked her cheek. "I believe that is the point. No more

hiding. You have dealt with your curse, found your mate, now it is time to rejoin the human world.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I am not a fan of reality right now. This is so much better.”

“And that is why she wants us out. This is your reality. You need to get used to it.”

Mina looked up at the earnest expression on his face, and she sighed. “I suppose so. It still seems very surreal.”

“That will be the removal of a curse you have lived with your entire adult life. It sounds too good to be true.”

“Not really. You are too good to be true. I am fairly sure that I have a concussion and am in a hospital somewhere.”

He grinned. “Then, I will be your devoted nurse. When you are ready to accept this as your reality, I will be here.” He kissed the tip of her nose and got to his feet. “Come along. I am sure that my grandmother will be delighted to meet you.”

“We are going straight to your gran?”

“Of course. She is the one who has insisted that the last two generations use the Crossroads. Our

family lives fairly firmly in the human world and marriage is a very fluid term. Mating in the Crossroads links us in a far more fundamental way. It bonds us from the soul outward and that gives us a better basis for our lives together."

"Oh? Your parents were a Crossroads mating?"

"Yes, my grandmother insisted. My grandfather was a bit of a philanderer, and she wanted better for her daughter."

The concept of infidelity made Mina blink. "Oh. I see."

"Yes, she lived a life that was

filled with human entertainments, and her inner beast longed for a proper mate. She wanted better for her child and grandchild.”

Mina smiled. “I think I will like her.”

“I believe you will, too. Now, get dressed, and we will see Teal and Tony, getting our registry and a trip home.”

She made a face but got to her feet, her legs aching and her skin tingling. A sundress was called for. She couldn't stand anything tight pressed against the juncture of her thighs right now.

After she put the dress on, she

tidied her hair and slipped on some high-heeled sandals. Robar's expression was appreciative, and she felt simply pretty for the first time in a long time. Normally, men in her community looked at her with a combination of attraction and fear.

"I am ready when you are." She smiled shyly.

He grinned, took her bag and his own, holding his free hand out to her. "Time to start the rest of your life. Are you ready?"

Mina laughed. "No, but I am going to do it anyway."

"Good girl." He kissed her hand

and tugged her out of the safety of his room.

Teebie spoke to her quickly at the base of the stairs, wishing her luck and telling her that the curse masters would be in touch with her for final removal of the last remains of the magic that still clung to her but now wrapped Robar as well.

Plenty of hugs later, they were on their way to the meditation centre as the rest of the visitors to the Crossroads were making their way to dinner.

Teal was grinning like a fool as they signed their registration of their mating.

Mina didn't have to decide on her last name right now. That would be something for the human world.

She signed document after document to pledge her life and offspring to Robar, and he did the same to her. One copy for the ocelot registry, one for the Crossroads archive, one for the fox registry and one for each of them for their families.

When all the documents were signed, Mina and Robar removed their charms and were ready to leave the Crossroads.

More hugs, farewells to be passed

to Ivy, Chuck, Lee and Jim, and a promise to write later, Teal and Tony opened a portal and sent Mina and Robar to his grandmother.

“Loreada Alenfleur, this is my mate, Mina Lancaster. Mina, this is my grandmother.” Robar kept his hand on her lower back, and Mina could feel that he was keeping her from running.

Mina looked at the woman and easily identified the features that had made her a beauty and had been transferred to her grandson in masculine form. “Pleased to meet you, madam.”

Loreada looked her up and down. “Are you one of my grandson’s tramps?”

Mina wrinkled her nose. “Hardly. I don’t get around much...well, until now.”

“How many lovers have you had, child?”

Mina blinked and stretched her neck a little. “Just the one, madam.”

Robar wrapped his arm completely around her and pulled her in front of him, holding her back against his body. “That would be me, Nana.”

The matron reared back. “Truly? How could a woman like you get

through life without a string of lovers?"

Mina wrinkled her nose. "It is complicated, but there was a little magical interference if that makes any sense."

Loreada got to her feet and smiled. "Are you going to be a good mate to my grandson?"

"As good as he is a mate to me, madam. I will only give what I get. I was not cut out to be a martyr."

She felt a squeeze from Robar. That had been the right answer.

His grandmother suddenly grinned. "Good answer. Now, give me a hug and tell me what you are.

You are not a fox but that is probably for the best. I have had my fill of vixens flicking their tails around here.”

Robar released her, and she went to give Loreada a careful hug. The older woman was having none of it and squeezed her tight. “Welcome to the family, Mina.”

“Thank you, madam. I am an ocelot. Robar and I are about the same size when shifted.”

“Call me Nana. Yes, I get the feeling that you are rather evenly matched. Now, dear, would you care for a run in the estate forest?”

Mina sighed in relief. “Yes please,

mad—Nana.”

“Good. I want to see what you look like.”

Robar led her to the pool house to change and out through the animal flap in the door before he streaked across the meadow, his tail flying in the breeze.

Mina was after him in an instant, while a silver-tinged fox watched them.

They ran, played and pounced on each other for hours. She caught his fluffy tail, and he bit the back of her neck.

Once they were reduced to flopping in the sun, tangled

together in a furry pile, nana came by and sniffed them both, nodding in approval. She gave them an hour together before she yipped in command, and they had to follow her back to the pool house.

It was time for dinner.

Chapter Ten

“Mina, you need a full wardrobe. We will be having rounds of parties to introduce you to our social set, and you can’t wear the same thing twice.”

Mina wrinkled her nose at the waste. “Why not?”

“Because the same people will be at the events, and they need a way to tell that it is a new night and not just a continuation of the evening before. These folk tend to drink a bit.” Nana winked. “I know it is stupid, but it is societal rules. I will

have Arduna's designer come in."

Mina looked at Robar. "Arduna?"

"My mother. My father is Johann." He smiled and continued to eat his dinner.

"Are you throwing me to the wolves here, Robar?"

He grinned and winked at her. "No, just to my grandmother. After she brings you up to speed, you will be able to face down any of my family or the exes that will show up to the endless parties she is about to throw."

Mina looked to Loreada, and the woman grinned beatifically.

"So, that was your plan in

bringing me here?" She discreetly kicked him under the table.

"Yes. Nana told me to stop fucking sluts, so I had to go to the Crossroads."

Nana laughed, "I just meant for him to find a woman whose vag had more tread on it than a bald tire. I never intended for him to locate a virgin."

Mina wrinkled her nose again. "And I never intended to find a man-whore. The Crossroads takes away societal preconceptions and leaves us with instinct and fate. Instinct led me to Robar and fate put him in my path."

“Well said, Mina.” Nana lifted her wineglass.

A foot touched her leg under the table, and Mina fought the urge to jump. She glared at Robar, and the foot slid up the inside of her calf and caressed her inner thigh just above the knee.

He kept an innocent expression on his face from across the table.

“Robar, I have had the master bedroom done up for you two. I am getting the feeling that you haven’t had much time together. You will have two days of room service before the designer will be here. I will set the first party for next

weekend. That should allow us plenty of prep time.”

Robar paused as the servant removed his plate. “Is that a hint, Nana?”

“It is an order. You two are putting out so many pheromones that it is getting hard to breathe in here.” Nana flapped her hand in the air and made a face. “I have forgotten what it is like to be that young. Take your enthusiasm elsewhere.”

Robar sat up and squirmed a bit.

Mina stifled a laugh. He was putting his shoe on.

Mina sipped at her wine and

asked nana, "How was it when his mother returned with Johann?"

Nana snickered. "I moved out to the dower house whenever they were in the mood. It was easier than trying to pretend my daughter wasn't noisy during intimate moments."

Robar groaned. "Nana, please. I don't want to think of Mother like that."

"How do you think you got here, junior? There was a stork at your christening, but he didn't deliver you." There was an evil gleam in her eye. "Come to think of it, your grandfather used to be quite vocal. I

wonder if you inherited that trait, Robar.”

Mina laughed as Robar blushed furiously and got to his feet. He came around the table and pulled Mina’s chair out for her.

Mina snickered. “Aren’t you going to answer your nana?”

He whispered, “You can answer her later.”

Now, it was Mina’s turn to blush.

Nana laughed and a plate with a flaming dessert was set down in front of her. She waved them off, and Robar pulled Mina out of the dining room and up the staircase.

She was wearing the same

sundress she had arrived in, and the moment they were in the master bedroom, Robar pressed her up against the closed door and kissed her in a fevered encouragement to arousal.

“Have I mentioned how delighted I am that you like to hide in trees and pounce on unsuspecting foxes?” He nibbled at her lips and nuzzled at her neck.

“No, but I have been able to guess.” She laughed when he lifted one of her legs and wrapped it around his hip.

“Really? I thought I concealed my emotions rather well.”

She rocked her hips against the erection concealed by his trousers. "I wouldn't call it emotion, but there isn't any hiding it."

He nipped sharply at her neck, and the sensation made her groan and lean her head to one side to allow him full access. He took advantage and his hands stroked her from shoulders to waist, taking her dress along in their travels, leaving her in her bra and panties. He lowered her leg and the fabric sighed to the floor.

He paused. "Now, I think I will stand back for a moment and consider my good luck."

He took her hand and helped her step from the dress.

Robar led her to the bed and turned her to face him. "I was unable to fully appreciate you the first time. You are perfect."

She was beyond blushing. Her surprise must have been imprinted on her features, because he kissed her forehead, the tip of her nose and her cheeks.

"I am far from perfect. I know that I skip beauty but qualify as cute." She wasn't trolling for compliments; she knew what she was.

"You are beautiful. Your inner

beast glows for mine and that is all that he sees. It shines through your human form and warms me every time I look at you." His words were a low whisper, and he reached behind her to unclasp her bra, working between flesh and the hard wood at her back.

He swept away the last bits of protection that her clothing provided and stared at her with admiration in his face. "Beautiful."

Her inner cat preened and lifted her head to look at him through lowered lashes. It was an invitation of the basest sort, and he must have caught it, because his clothing went

flying once again.

“This time, you are going to let me do what I wish, though you can give me suggestions.”

He stepped toward her, and she backed up in reflex, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“Um, sounds good, but are we going to take turns? I don’t know about you always being in charge.”

He grinned and tipped her back, following her as she retreated toward the head of the bed.

“We can negotiate at a later time. Nothing that happens in this bed will be mentioned outside of it. Whatever you wish to do is

between you and me.”

It was a nice thought, but her mind couldn't hold onto it as he lowered his head to rest it between her breasts before he nuzzled at one and then the other. Her nerves came alive, and the connection between her nipples and her clit was made apparent.

Her sex throbbed while he worked at her breasts as he made his way down her torso; she shivered and clutched at his hair, holding him to her.

He lapped at her clit and slid a finger into her.

She clenched around him and

twisted under him while his hands moved and a second finger entered her.

Mina could hear how wet she was getting, and the sounds triggered a tightening of her body as she twisted nearer to climax. She was a few finger strokes away from it when he withdrew and surged up her body, lodging in her opening and rocking into her with short jolts of his hips.

She stared up at him with wide eyes as he worked inside her, and when she reached for him, he grabbed her hands and pinned them over her head, as he lowered

his lips to hers, kissing her ravenously as his body thrust and retreated as his cock worked its way inside her.

She groaned when he filled her completely and arched against him, stroking his tongue with hers and rubbing her breasts against his chest. Her inner cat wanted to rub every inch against him, and Mina couldn't think why that was a bad idea.

Her release approached again as his thick shaft slid in and out in repetition that caused her body to ache and clench in an effort to hold him in. When she locked in place

and her breath left her lungs, he thrust rapidly until his body shook and his hips jerked against hers in random pulses. He growled softly against her mouth, and she smiled. No problem with sound here. They were both quiet.

Mind you, she wasn't in heat, either. That would be another matter entirely.

He slumped on her and nuzzled at her neck and ear. "That took the edge off."

She chuckled. "You could say that. I am very glad I never acquired that particular edge while I was waiting. I would have gone

nuts being unable to bring things to a satisfying conclusion.”

He grinned and nuzzled her again. “Are you satisfied?”

“I am.”

“Good. Next time, I want to hear you scream.”

She blinked. “I don’t think I have ever done something like that.”

“You can, you will.” He laughed.

She doubted the likelihood of that, but she kept it to herself.

Her hands were pressed to the window frame, Robar’s fingers stroked down her spine and rubbed at the spot right above her buttocks. She hissed and lifted herself to him

with a groan.

He took the invitation and thrust into her hard and fast, leaning forward and biting the base of her neck.

She screamed, bucked and came immediately, her instincts and inner beast rioting in a wild conflagration that scattered her senses and shattered her calm.

She heard a laugh, but he kept his needle-like teeth in her shoulder as he shouted and shuddered with his own release.

When he finally withdrew his teeth, she shuddered with an aftershock that milked the column

of his cock inside her. "Satisfied?"

Her voice was hoarse and her limbs were shaking.

"I am getting there. You?"

"Don't tease." She snorted and took one of his hands, drawing his fingers into her mouth, one by one, stroking them with her tongue.

He hissed and jerked his hand away. "You have a dress fitting in half an hour. We need to get you tidied up."

She grumbled and winced when he withdrew from her. Two days spent satisfying every carnal impulse she could think of had left her exhausted, sore and a lot more

confident in her dealings with Robar.

She let him bully her into the shower and stood while he bathed her. He enjoyed doing it, so she let him. Once she was clean and he had attended to the bite marks, he wrapped her in a fluffy towel and set her on a chair while he dried her hair.

He was the vice president of his family's company, and despite his carefree life as a playboy, he did have a work ethic. Two hours every morning were spent on work, and the rest of the day was his to play with. As he mentioned, if you hired

competent people and paid them well, you could afford to take time off now and then.

“I do love your hair, Mina.”

“I have noticed that, Robar. You curl up with it while you sleep.” She snickered.

“It is just so soft.”

“I know. Difference between cat and dog. I am silky but deadly, and you are all cute and fluffy.” She winked, and he tugged her locks.

“I will give you cute and fluffy.”

“I thought you just did.”

He sighed. “You are putting something on the list already.”

She grinned. “I know.”

They agreed not to discuss their bedroom when they were outside of it, but if there were any innuendo or sexual challenges, they would just refer to it as adding it to the list. It was circumspect, and while folks would figure it out, it did allow for a bit of public flirtation.

A knock at the door called a halt to the verbal fencing. It was time for Mina to get the wardrobe she would need for her new life.

Chapter Eleven

The wedding was a strange blend of cats and dogs. The Lancasters were only too delighted to attend the marriage of one of their own, but the Pickwicks were unsure of their newest member.

Nana and Mina's mother helped her with the beaded white gown.

"Thanks for coming, Mom. Nana has been wonderful, but I needed some more cats here on my big day."

Nana beamed. "It has been a delight and a pleasure, Mina. Your

family is so delightful and lively. As long as I remember to guard my tail during runs, all is serene.”

The Lancasters had arrived two days earlier, and a joint shift had been declared necessary. The foxes had been surprised to find out that they were all considered cat toys and only self-control kept the Lancasters from chasing their new in-laws.

Robar's mother had been less than pleased to meet her new daughter-in-law. She had been hoping for one of the ex-girlfriends to make it through the Crossroads. Mina was resigned to not winning

her over. She had nana and Johann on her side and that was enough.

A voice from the doorway interrupted their moment. "I need to speak with Mina Lancaster."

She looked at the door through the mirror, her reflection wearing pearls through the long red locks and a thick necklace cascaded down the front of her bead-covered silk gown. "Who is it?"

A man turned the corner, and she stared at the familiarity before his identity clicked. "Oh. Nana, Mama, please give us a moment."

He gave a new meaning to tall, dark and handsome. Thomas

Flicker had become a stunning man where the shy child had stood.

“Mina? You look amazing.” He smiled, and the shy expression was the one she remembered from all those years ago.

“Thank you. I really doubted that I would ever make it to my wedding day. This was a bit of a journey for me.”

He nodded and ducked his head. “It was mostly my fault. I am very sorry. My parents thought that if they ignored my training, the power would just evaporate or something.”

She nodded. “I understand. I

managed to find my way, but I had some help.”

Thomas bobbed his head. “I understand that, too, but I am here to remove the last vestiges of the curse and give you a blessing instead.”

“That is not necessary.”

“Actually, it is. I have to restore the balance or I will suffer for it in my next life. You would be doing me a favour.”

She extended her hand to him. “I hold no ill will toward you. I am happy today, and I want everyone around me to be happy as well.”

“That always was part of your

charm, so now, it will become part of *the* charm. You will make friends wherever you go, as you always have, but no one will ever think ill of you." He smiled and took her hand, sending a rush up her arm that lit up her soul.

She laughed, "Thank you. I swear it has been difficult being a shifter with a curse on her."

He blinked. "Yes, I just learned that. I had no idea."

"I know. I had no idea you were a human magic user. It isn't like we wear signs." She grinned and leaned up to kiss his cheek. "Thank you for doing what you could.

Many men have had miserable moments around me in the last few years. Even my mate."

"If you are mated, why the wedding?"

"We are mated spiritually, but the human world has its requirements. A licence and ceremony are one of them."

"Ah. May I stay for the wedding?"

She grinned. "Of course. Just know that everyone here is some kind of shifter. It will make things easier on you."

He inclined his head and kissed her cheek. "You really did grow to

be beautiful.”

“You are not too bad yourself. If it wasn’t for that smile, I would be hard pressed to recognize you. You have grown.”

He grinned. “That happens over the years.”

“It does.”

Music started and she jolted. “Oops. Get to a seat. It is show time.”

Nana and Mina’s mother came back in and shooed him out. They finished her lipstick and settled the veil down over her features.

The mothers left her alone, and she waited for her cue with a

bouquet of pale pink roses.

She stepped out when her music started, and her gaze locked on Robar. It was their moment.

* * * *

Thomas watched the expressions on many of the guests turn from sneering to supportive and delighted as Mina passed by them.

It was the least he could do for the extensive chain of disaster that he had pinned to his childhood crush. Mina had been charming, friendly, outgoing and lovely. Everything that Thomas wasn't. When she had refused to go out

with him again, he had taken it as a complete rejection of him, rather than a statement that she was not ready to commit to anyone. He had overreacted, and she had paid the price.

When he told his parents what happened, they could no longer ignore the magic that swirled around him at all times. They had taken him close to a tutor and set him up with a curse master who taught him to control his energies. He had been forbidden from going back to see Mina. His curse master had foolishly thought that it was a one-time spell that was cast on her

dates. If Thomas had simply had enough nerve to make the full extent of the protection spell known, he might have saved Mina years of agony.

Making everyone think of her the same way that he did was the least he could do. He saw the way her mate looked at her and winced as he realised that the couple he was watching had shattered his spell together. Robar would never think of his wife the way that Thomas did and that was for the best.

To Thomas, Mina was a glowing statue of all that was good, and she was one of his best memories. He

sighed and looked around at the other guests, and to his surprise, he saw a woman with bright green eyes looking at him shyly.

Her hair was black, her skin was pale and her lips were deep red. They locked gazes, and he saw the shell on her back, recognizing her as a turtle shifter. He didn't care. She was perfect, and when she smiled softly, his heart skipped a beat.

The wedding blurred by until the dancing began. Thomas got up from the table where he had been sharing absent-minded conversation about import treaties,

and he crossed the hall to stop next to the table where the woman of his dreams was waiting.

“Excuse me. Would you care to dance?” He could not believe that he was asking this elegant creature to dance.

“I would. Thank you.” She rose to her feet, and her head was even with his collarbone. Perfect.

He walked her to the dance floor and tucked her against him, swaying slowly. “My name is Thomas.”

“I know. My sister recognized you. You are a mage,” she spoke slowly.

“I am.”

“My name is Lizzel Lancaster. I am Mina’s cousin.” She looked up at him, her bright green eyes meeting his for a moment before she looked away.

“Lizzel. I am pleased to meet you. I think I may have been waiting for you all my life.”

She grinned. “I know. My beast got my attention, and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since I saw you.”

“Do you always listen to your inner beast?”

“It is best. She doesn’t move fast, but she never steers me wrong.”

Lizzel smiled and shifted closer to him, sending blood pooling below his waist with a pounding pulse.

Thomas knew that he had found the woman for his life, not his dreams. So what if mages and shifters weren't supposed to blend. Rules were made to be broken and fate was leading the way.

* * * *

Mina sighed and swayed against Robar. "Lizzel has got him. I knew that he was meant for someone else, but you can't explain that to someone without a beast."

Her husband held her tight and whispered in her ear. "You can't explain it to someone with a beast, you simply have to experience it for yourself."

"I like the experiences my beast leads me on."

"I know. I have added a few things to the list since seeing you in that dress." He leaned back and smiled.

She kissed him and laughed. "I have a list as long as your...arm."

He swung her around, and she went where he led. There would be time enough to take charge and assume control. It was on her list.

Author's Note

An ocelot, a curse and a fox with a fluffy tail. The story didn't write itself, but it did do most of the heavy lifting.

In the next book, *Little Prick*, a shy porcupine seeks love in the Crossroads and finds it in the arms of a honey badger with an aggressive attitude who has to temper his instincts to coax her in close.

Thanks for reading.

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About the Author

Zenina Masters was born in Canada and lives in Canada. She has a regular job and does nothing particularly exciting with her life. She enjoys fishing, silence and the ability to pick and choose friends she can trust. Life is too short to watch your back all the time.

Her writing life is a teeny bit of escapism, she would probably chicken out if confronted by three

naked men and looks forward to
one day finding out.