

Temptriss in a Teapot

by Richard Tornello

CHAPTER I

An act of kindness to a battered stray cat had changed Artie's life forever. The cat -- the Big Gray Cat -- had granted him three wishes. Artie had wished for the ability to travel anywhere, instantaneously, and the gift of tongues. Now he wanted something more: he wanted to understand how such things were possible. Which is how he had ended up here -- wherever here was.

"Hey you, cat, are you the Resident Wand?" asks Artie in a loud voice.

The large, bright orange tabby opens one green eye, looks up at the stranger. With a snap of his tail, he points down the brick road and says, "No, *she* is."

A few seconds later, he looks up again and mumbles to no being in particular, "A *human*? What's a *human* doing here, looking for *her*?" The cat snorts, yawns, his sharp teeth reflecting the sun, and says, "Not *my* problem, yet."

He nuzzles his muzzle in his huge paws, goes back to his nap to continue the interesting dream that was so rudely interrupted by this human.

The tabby was not especially happy to know that some time back, Artie had been granted three wishes by a large gray cat, after rescuing (or so Artie thought) said cat from starving in the wild. Artie had used his first and second wishes to obtain two unusual abilities for himself and for the members of his family. Having read *The Monkey's Paw* and other cautionary tales, he had spent quite a long time considering what he really wanted and the possible consequences of each choice before settling on his third and final wish.

Wish granted: he is now in the Cat's world. But after looking around and following the conversation with this *other* cat, Artie realizes he forgot to ask for an owner's manual.

Artie looks back at the orange tabby and shakes his head. *Real friendly*, he thinks. *He's not at all like the big Gray.*

Taking the views in while walking down the brick paved road, enjoying it all, Artie strolls in the recommended direction. After some time he comes upon a very pretty young woman sitting on a park bench. He stops in his tracks. She has an uncanny resemblance to the paintings of the goddesses of mythology as portrayed by Michael Parkes. He is, as any mortal being would be, awe struck.

Gathering himself before he speaks and wondering what else is in store for him, Artie finally coughs slightly and says, "Hello, I'm Artie. The Gray Cat sent me. The orange tabby pointed in your direction. Since I have never known a cat to lie, I presume that you are the She who is the Resident Wand." He makes a deep bow.

"The *Big Gray* Cat sent you *here*?" she asks in amazement. "And Pangerban, the orange Watcher, let you in? You've obviously got connections. Hey, not too bad."

In a lower voice, with lowered eyes, she murmurs, "Smarty... That's a cute name." She smiles, making Artie feel even less worthy to be in her presence.

"Yes, why?" he stammers. "I mean yes and no. Yes to the cat, both cats, and no to my name. It's Artie, not smarty." He wonders if she's a bit loose on top. His own head feels rather wobbly at the moment.

"Well, what is it, yes or no?" she laughs.

Artie is not sure just what to say. But before he can attempt to explain she says, "Oh I heard about you. You're the guy who tried to save him or something like that. That was real nice. He let you come here? That's not something the Boss would normally do."

"The Boss?" exclaims Artie. "He's *your* Boss? Now *that* explains a few things about him." *The air of amused condescension, for one thing -- even more than with a regular cat, that is.*

Realizing that the Resident Wand is still waiting for an answer, Artie continues, "Yeah I want to get a better understanding of this dimension and maybe a better understanding of life itself. He said I should start with you."

All of a sudden everything shudders and shakes.

"Hey, does the ground always shake around here?" he asks. "And if I may inquire, what's your name? Mine is *Artie*."

"Fine, Smarty," she says, "Mine is Blanche." And in a voice that seems to reflect the frequency of the shaking ground, she continues, "Yes, the ground shakes every now and then. It just depends. I have no control over that. I used to, but not anymore."

Artie blinks, wondering whether it is stranger: that she could ever control the shaking of the ground, or that for some reason she has lost that power. Then his brain processes the rest of her words and he sighs.

"No, my name is Artie, A R T I E, Artie," he says, his voice vibrating in sympathy with the ground as hers had.

"Okay Marty, if the Gray Cat says it's fine, then I guess it is. What can I do for you?"

The shaking stops just as suddenly as it started.

Artie gives up trying to reason with her. "I'm not sure. I'm looking to learn more about your world. Tell me your story. I just want a place to start."

Blanche starts laughing, "A face to fart? What *is* wrong with you?"

Artie is nonplused, wondering if all the earth tremors have affected her hearing. "No, Blanche, a place to *start*, a beginning, so I can understand this world, my world, his world." He spreads his arms wide.

Blanche is in stitches. "He never said you were funny. You're here for comic relief. That's gotta be it."

Manners, Artie says to himself, *manners. She's a bit ding-bat ditsy or something. A Lewis Carroll Hatter minus the hat. Should have asked the Big Gray Cat if he was a Cheshire.* "No," he says patiently, "the Cat is simply fulfilling my wish to understand this, his universe. I guess this is New Universe College 101 and you are my new teacher."

"I'm your preacher! Bow down and grovel before my very presence," she says, barely able to control her laughter. "You are so funny. I love it. Come on let me show you around. You are a relief from all these stuffed shirts here. You know *They* have us here because we may cause trouble, out...there." Her arms cross each other in opposite directions, and pinwheel as she points to all different directions including down. "I mean, really, what could we do that would mess things up any more that they really are?"

Artie thinks, *Ditsy -- but smart.* He asks, "So where *is* here?"

"Here is here. It's always and just is. I told you a second ago. Are you stupid or brain addled?"

"No, what I want to understand is, are we ...

Blanche interrupts as if Artie were not speaking. "You think in terms of your dimensional existence. This is different. I'm not physicist like my cousin, that bitch, but I do understand things scientific. I'm more of the artsy-fartsy type. Speaking of which, did you know, some time ago, I gave some scarecrow the ability to fart? He was wandering around that same brick road you were on and came up to me one day. He knew who I was and asked me for a fart. Can you imagine? So I gave it to him. Now he's just another gas bag. He called me a nasty witch!"

"I'm not sure that was the term," Artie suggested.

She ignores that and continues, "There were others including some whiney brat and a dog. A guy in an iron suit wanted a brain. He needed a lobotomy. He was wearing an iron suit in this weather, what an idiot. He needed common sense. I told him brain transplants

were done at some medical center, just follow the signs to, now what was that place called? Emerald Green's Holistic Hostel or..."

Artie can't help it and offers, "Oz?"

"Who's Odds?" she demands

"No. Oz, like in the story."

"The Gray Cat is not odd. Be careful what you say about the Boss." She looks Artie straight in the eyes, hands on her hips.

Artie is now totally confused. *Where does reality begin and end? Her story sounds like a cross between L. Frank Baum, Lewis Carroll, and Jonathan Swift, part fairy tale, part satire, part horror story, if it's all true. Or -- it's entirely possible the Boss is screwing with me, and she's in on it.*

He decides to go along with it, and act as if it's all true. "Who else from my world has been here?" Artie he asks.

"Who has been where? Here is all over," she responds, smiling and spreading her arms wide. She gives Artie a wink.

"Jeeze..." Artie closes his eyes, frustration oozing from his whole being.

"Sneeze?" She hands him a tissue, but as he tugs on it, it keeps coming out her pocket like a magician's endless string of handkerchiefs. "Shiny side down," she laughs again.

All of a sudden it feels as if the whole universe is shaking.

"Damn, I hate when that happens," Blanche says, pouting. "We haven't had any movement for years, eons even, and now all of a sudden all this shake and bake. I need to talk to the Cat about this." Blanche is angry. And then she mumbles something about her cousin and family doing this to her.

Artie is hanging on to a tree for stability. He looks to her and says, "I'll talk to the Cat. I can traverse anywhere I choose."

"Yeah, you do that. Good luck," she says sarcastically.

Artie asks, "What did you do? Are you locked up here? What's going on? Except for the occasional violent quake this appears to be a nice place."

"Violins, where"? She asks.

Artie realizes it is best to ignore her ad lib comments

She takes his lack of reaction as encouragement. "I think I mentioned to you before, everyone here is somewhat of a misfit, or so they tell us. We're here for 'our protection', as well as the protection of all the other universes we inhabited in the past. Me, I was in yours at one time. I had a run in with a few of the Powers That Be, seven of them and..." She thinks for a second, "I lost. Bad odds."

Artie is so totally confused. But after a moment's thought, things begin to add up, all the data past and present: fairy tales and folk tales, myths and legends, his experiences with the Big Gray Cat and here with Blanche, Carroll and Baum and Swift, oh my. Finally, he says, "Okay let me guess. This, all of this, you and all the stories that have been propagated as fairy tales or myths..."

She quickly interrupts, "All or most all true, to a degree."

Artie starts to laugh, "And you are here because you screwed up in some political power struggle, and you mess up the language because you are hard of hearing?"

Flames spurt from her eyes, and she yells, "You will never mention that. I am not. I am perfect!"

Artie snuffs the sparks smoldering in his hair and eyebrows and says, "Hey lady, back off. You have a problem. I'm simply pointing it out. I'm not here to change anything. But really, you need to get a grip." He thinks, scratching his head, *Maybe this is the best place for her. I wonder why the Cat, the Boss as she calls him, wanted me to start with her? It's their world. It can't all be like this -- can it?*

Blanche changes her tone just as quickly, "Get a rip? Drink? What do you have in mind? Gin and tonic? I would *really* like a gin and tonic --"

"See what I mean? I said get a G R I P, grip, and get hold of yourself, read my lips if you have to. But a G&T wouldn't be a bad idea right now."

She slaps him hard. "That's personal and none of your business." She adds just as quickly, "and I wouldn't touch your lips, though they are cute." Then she looks at him and asks, "You married or seeing any one?"

"No," and Artie backs up a little, rubs his face, thinking *Strong for such a frail-looking girl... Not good when combined with a short temper and a bunch of loose screws.* Then he wonders if Blanche's resemblance to the woman in Parkes' paintings is just a coincidence, or if Parkes had met Our Lady of the Mean Right Cross...

CHAPTER II

Rick Steven had purchased a piece of glass from the nearby store to replace a broken panel in his own storefront. The glass was -- special, and should not have been offered for sale. The product of an experiment by members of the family that had owned the shop

for generations, its reflections showed -- the future? A future, anyway. And the things Rick had seen had changed his life for the better.

Rick was on his way to the XYZ Coffee shop. He stopped in the glass store, rummaged around in the back and found an old glass tea pot that grabbed his interest. The store, ALICE WHITE, CUSTOM/ANTIQUÉ GLASS & MIRRORS was next door to his Laundromat. The glass store belonged to an old local family that had been founded by two cousins centuries ago. He came and went just to kill time with the manager Fred Spiegel.

The store catered to the local business and college market with an occasional residential broken window repair here and there. It was also a storage area for special projects. Rick said to Fred the manager who was uncle to Alice White the owner, "I'm not a collector of glass but found this tea pot interesting. Is it for sale?" He didn't want to purchase a non-saleable item as he had done with the glass pane some time ago. That sale caused one of the family members to be transferred. Fred assured him it was fine. "I don't even know where that came from. Where did you find it?" Fred asked.

"In the back," Rick said pointing to a darker corner of the store. "How much?"

"Beats me, I've never seen it before. How about \$10.00?. It's *antique*," Fred said laughing.

"Five bucks and not a penny less," countered Rick

"Deal!"

"You want something to drink?" Rick asked as he was heading out to the coffee shop that they both frequented.

"Sure let me go with you. No need to lock up. Everyone knows if I'm not here, I'm there."

They both headed to the coffee shop to enjoy a decent amount of the trimethalzanthine that the shop pervaded, along with a danish, or a donut, or both. More would be more like it.

After a few minutes of simple enjoying the drink and taking in the beautiful weather, Fred looks hard into Rick's eyes and says in a tone Rick had not heard in a long time, "I understand that you are seeing my niece." This was more than just a statement of fact, it was a protective move and very old fashioned.

"Yes in a way. She is in and out of this place on her bigger more important business ventures. I see her when she is free." Picking up on the implication Fred made, "I'd like to see it get a bit more serious. I certainly have good intentions." Rick says this in all seriousness and truth.

Fred nods and takes a sip, "Very good, very good. Yes I think you two would be fine as different as you both are."

Rick says, "Your family is very interesting. You have a very old history that appears to get foggy with the details the further you all go back, like most families. And yet, some of the stories are so detailed. Very strange."

Fred Spiegel gives him a look over the coffee and with a full mouth of pastry, mumbles something that sounds affirmative in some fashion.

The point being made and understood by both parties, Rick changes the subject, "Fred, Let's take a look at this tea pot in a better light. Maybe there is a name or something indicating who made it.

Fred looks up and nods.

Rick takes the tea pot, and with a clean napkin dusts it off. The glass itself is uneven in thickness and is smoky in spots. The diffuser is grungy caked over with residue from the former owners whoever they might have been. The shape is typical tea pot shaped with a pouring handle and a spout. Why this attracted Rick, he has no idea.

"Fred," he says, "do you have any more older and odd glassware in the store?"

Fred looks at Rick and says, "Yes we do, but it's not for the public sale. I can show you some but I'd rather you didn't mention this since it's not for you or anyone else. And I think Alice would be a bit upset if I started showing a *non-family member* some of our technical research products and antiques that she stores here."

"Do you mind if I look anyway? I was wondering if this has a matching set of anything, like cups to go with it." Rick noticed the nonfamily comment and a look that Fred gave him when he said that. Something was being said, just what, that he wasn't quite sure.

Fred appears to relax "Yeah I guess it's okay. I still never saw that tea pot before today. Maybe I shouldn't have sold it to you. You remember that piece of glass my nephew sold you some time ago. Alice was in a storm about that. She never let on to you, but I'm telling you. That's why you don't see Kit around anymore. He was told the rules. And as is his nature, he didn't follow them causing Alice to move him to a different location."

"If you want just give me my five dollars back and you can have it. I never knew about Kit. She was so low-key about it. I just thought he transferred back to one of the other operations Alice runs. I don't want you canned. What's the story? Why all the fuss?"

"I won't be transferred. Don't worry about that. You really don't know?" Fred inquired.

"No just that it's a special piece of glass with some unusual reflective properties and people seem to enjoy looking through it as they pass my store."

"Exactly!" says Fred, "and...."

The phone rings in Rick's pocket. He looks at the number. "Speaking of Alice, this is her right now. Would you excuse me?"

Fred nods and gives a wave. Rick steps outside. Both he and Fred concurred some time ago; they both think it's extremely rude when people have private conversations in a restaurant on a phone.

"Hi, funny you should call, your Uncle and I were just speaking about you. You know?"

She says, "Intuition, quantum entanglement, oh never mind. Are you free tonight? I'll be in town and I'd love to see you."

"Sure. I'll fix something up or do you want to go out?" he asks.

"Do you mind, I'm tired of eating out." she says in a voice that has more there than just the subject at hand.

"Not at all. I wouldn't ask if I did. White or red? See you around?"

"I'll be there about sevenish. Get a red, a pinot, North West coast and make it two bottles."

Rick's mind goes into overdrive, two? Something is up. He heads back into the shop and sits down next to Fred. "Alice will be over this evening."

Fred nods and says, "I guessed so by the look on your face through the window. Have fun. Now back to this tea pot. You want to take it home. Show it to Alice. I don't think she knows we have it."

Have it? Rick thinks, it's a tea pot, big deal. When it come to glass and mirrors this family get border line strange. All he says is, "Sure I'll take it home. I know better than to clean an antique. It can be ruined through incorrect handling. I'll let Alice make a recommendation."

"Good idea, you do that," Fred says with a wink.

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Rick leaves Fred and goes to the local Whole Foods® to get the ingredients and wine for dinner. Rick goes up to Walter the Wine Wizard and tells him what he's going to prepare: Mediterranean roast salmon with Moroccan spices, asparagus with red onion vinaigrette, Israeli couscous, berries with ice cream dessert. Walter here are the ingredients, what do you think will work? SHE wants a pinot."

Walter can look at the ingredients of a meal and without fail pick out an excellent wine. Walter knows who he is talking about. Everyone in town knows that they are an item.

Walter announces with his customary flourish, "There that should be a good dinner. I can taste it." He bows and points to the wine racks, "and now for the wine." he says.

"She wants a North West Coast pinot, what do you think. She defers to you on this too."

Walter picks one out and says, "Here is one but I really recommend this."

"I'll take them both, in fact two of each. I've got to keep her happy," Rick says laughing.

"You had better," says Walter in a manner Rick does not understand. What is he implying? Is he family too?"

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Alice shows up early as usual. She hates being late, punctual is good. Early is better in her world. And, since this is Rick, early is best.

"I'm working on the dinner; you want a glass of wine?" Knowing the answer he has it ready.

Alice enjoys the glass and has another one. A broad smile stretches across her face. "Hey can you put some of this on hold for a bit?"

Rick is at the point that a time out in dinner preparation is not an issue. They retire to the couch and then his room. Dinner will be served a bit later than planned.

Dinner is a mellow affair for both of them. They both are buzzing and very relaxed. Alice looks great in the kimono. After dinner Rick asks, "You wanted to talk about something? Or ???"

"Yeah a couple of things, a me and you type of thing and related family stuff. I need to speak to you about some things that are very personal and you have to swear that this goes no further than this room."

"Done, you know I worked in similar type environments. Not a big deal, keeping my mouth shut." Rick wonders what could she say that he would be surprised about?

She smiles. Shut she thinks? With duct tape, maybe. She gives him a grab, a kiss, then begins, "Well maybe, but this will be news to you. You know the story Alice Through the Looking Glass?"

"Yeah a kids story." Rick answers, looking at her, with no clue where this is going.

"Well my dear, not really, just a modification of the truth. The author was one of *us*, and..."

"*Us*? What do you mean, 'one of *us*'?"

"Let me finish, please. You North East types, no manners. Think about that piece of glass in your window. My family is not of your world and I am the direct relation to Alice of that story. The story is older than the written account, but it gets to the point. In fact my cousin Blanche is the descendent of yet another character. You've never met her for a number of reasons."

"You had something to drink before you got here?" asks Rick joking, and not.

"I'm not kidding Richard, she says in a most serious manner. Listen My family is what you would call witches, genies and other things."

"Let's try this. My uncle said you purchased a tea pot. I know the one. How you manage to get your hands on the things that no one should have is beyond me but you do. Please go get it."

Rick says, "Your Uncle said he wasn't aware of this being anything important. And by-the-way, I got my hands on you, didn't I?" as he goes and gets the grungy tea pot.

She laughs, "Yes you did. And we'll get back to that again later."

Then she says to herself, "Uncle wasn't aware of this teapot? I am surprised."

Holding the teapot in outstretched hands Rick asks, "Okay, so now what?"

"This tea pot holds a portal to another universe. A full universe and all that that means. If it had been anyone but you that had purchased this they would have disappeared. It's that simple. Our rules."

Rick looks at her. "Great story. Unless you're serious, in which case you're crazy..."

Alice is serious as a heart attack when she faces Rick. She's not sure what she is going to say so she just starts, "Seriously, Rick. No, that's where we keep the wacko 'aunt in the attic' types or slightly dangerous members of our kind. By dangerous, I mean they could inadvertently hurt people, themselves or give our world away. They are not the evil types. We have other places for them and *that* is another story!" She studies Rick's face, sees the raised eyebrows that shout 'don't kid a kidder', and says gravely, "Rick, *I am not joking.*"

CHAPTER III

Artie and Blanche have been talking about the whole universe, this place and her past. She has heard of him. "Most everyone has. You saved the Boss. So here you are, checking the place out."

"Curiosity killed the cat," said Blanche laughing. "No it didn't but we started that so people would be afraid to look at what's in front of their very noses. I think the Boss came up with that five or six millennia ago."

"That old?" asked Artie.

"The saying or the Boss?" asks Blanche looking at him in a strange manner. She has never met one like this. By this time most men would be trying to figure a way to get her in bed. This guy is different. He hasn't even made a pass. She starts to drop the hard of hearing shtick.

"Either one would be a start," returns Artie.

"The saying. He's way older. We, I, don't even know when he was created or from where," says Blanche. "He never says."

Blanche looks up, "Oh, shit the system just locked!"

"And what does that mean?" Asks Artie.

"A number of things. For you directly it means you're stuck here with me until it opens. Lucky you. For me it means someone of power ordered it. I wonder who and why. It wouldn't be the Boss unless there was a problem. There are only a few with the power to order it. I bet it was that bitch of a cousin of mine, Alice."

Artie starts laughing, "Alice as in Alice in Wonderland?" He is leaking from both eyes like a submarine blowing ballast.

Blanche looks at him and says, "Alice in blunderbitchland and I know exactly what you said. Yes you have the right idea but you are way off. Consider the world you're in presently and extrapolate."

"What? Where did that come from?" Artie stops laughing almost as quickly as he started.

"Hey watch it buster. I may be a bit off but I'm not stupid," says Blanche.

"I never even thought that," Artie says somewhat defensively and means it too.

"Okay, but watch it buddy," she now smiles remembering she is dealing with a human just allowed into her world.

Artie aims to get the conversation back on track, "Back to your original comments, why would Alice do that?"

"I'm not really sure. I'll guess we will find out sooner than later. Are you having a good time? Are you compiling the data you need to understand this entire universe?"

"Yes and no. This is just a beginning. Not too bad. I guess my original problem was meeting the Boss as you call him. Once I got over that, I was open to the possibility of most anything. It's my kids that I have a bit of concern about."

"Blanche, have you noticed no earth quake?"

"Universe quake," she corrects. "Yep, and I would venture to bet it's my cousin's doing."

"Back to the point." She says. "You wished it. *If you recall*, it was part of the Bosses reward to you for 'saving him'. We all know. In fact we are wondering just how this will turn out over the ten generations that your wish has been expanded to," said Blanche in all seriousness. She thought the generational extension was a stupid thing to do. When she was polled, she said so. She told Artie too.

"I wonder too," he responded.

Approaching over the hill were two beings and a very large cat with green shining headlights like eyes.

"It's Alice, some guy, and Pangerban the guardian cat, the orange tabby you met when you arrived here."

CHAPTER IV

Rick thinks about what Alice just said. He takes a sip of wine. He looks at her, thinks a bit more. He's not sure whether to laugh or run. Instead he says, "Okay Alice, *show me!*"

"I was hoping you would say that," says Alice. She wraps her long slender fingers around the teapot.

The next thing he knows he is standing with Alice before a very big orange tabby cat. The cat sees Alice and gets up to its full height, stretches in what appears to be a bow and then speaks.

Rick is in total shock. A talking cat. What's in the wine?

The cat says, "Madam, what's all this? Two humans in one day?"

Alice looks at the cat and demands, "Pangerban, What are you talking about?"

"The Boss sent or allowed one over. He's with Blanche right now." His tail points down the road.

"The Boss?"

"Yes Madam, the Boss."

Alice says, pissed, "He's not to do anything without consulting me."

"It was part of *that* human's wish that you all approved, against my better judgment."

"Damn it all." Alice looks at Rick and says, "Well, you're going to get more than I expected. Here goes."

Rick says, "Wait a minute, Alice. You've just dumped a truck load of information that is beyond my understanding. I get some of this, but I feel I must be dreaming."

"I'm actually living in another dimension or parallel world? I'm not sure of where my feet are. I mean look!" Rick points to Pangerban. His voice rises an octave, or two. "I have a talking cat in front of me!"

The cat just looks at Rick, thinking, She likes him? What a nut case. Get over it.

Rick continues, mentally noting what looks like the appearance of a smirk on the cat's face, "You know him and act as if this is an everyday sort of occurrence. I am from the planet Earth!"

Rick catches his breath, stares at Alice who face him with a look what seems to be one of concern, and he continues pointing a shaking finger at the orange tabby, "then *he* mentioned another human, and Blanche. Blanche is another word for white. Let me guess, Snow White..."

Pangerban cleans his huge left paw and yawns.

Alice sighs, and says, as calmly as she can manage, "Rick, please. She's a distant relative to her, but you are on the mark. This will all be explained. Remember what I said about the dangerous types? She's here because she refuses to recognize an infirmity that causes all sorts of problems. And now this damned human that we gave a modified set of wishes to for helping the Boss is here too." She pauses, then lets out a long breath, muttering, "what a mess."

Alice continues, "Rick, this is part of my life. I was going to give it to you in small doses but here you are." She gives him a look of concern and a hug. She doesn't want to lose this one.

Rick is mentally exhausted. He sits down on a bench that just happens to pop out of nowhere. The cat bows toward Rick and say, "I thought you could use that about now. Want a drink too?"

Rick states looking about, up and down, "No I want to be a sober as possible for this. Thank you for the offer." Rick gives a slight bow toward Pangerban. It was just something that just came into his head to do. That was new. He looks at Alice. She winks. Did she put that into his head too?

"Rather polite. I like that," said the cat ignoring Rick's earlier tirade.

"Yes, he is. Smart, funny, a good cook and if possible my future..."

Rick looks up at her. "You have to be kidding, say no to you? You're incredible. This is totally amazing. This must be what your Uncle was attempting to hint. I never would have believed him, or you either. "

She laughs.

Rick, aware of this new reality, just nods his head and says, "Apparently we, you, have some business to attend to. Do you want me along?" He is able to get his brain working and accepting the reality and present situation. He trusts Alice. "Okay he says to Alice, here I am let's do what has to be done. Just let me know where the land mines are."

"Sure, but there is nothing really dangerous just some check-ups and insurance to make sure things are in place," Alice states matter of fact. To herself she thinks she's not sure.

Rick asks, "Blanche and the human?"

"Yes."

"Guardian Cat, do you want to seal off the place and come?" This was not really a question but an order.

"Yes madam. Your wish is my command. The universe is sealed. No in, no out."

"Okay let's go. This is going to be different," she says and gives Rick a kiss. "Don't worry. I wouldn't put you in danger."

Talk about role reversal he thinks. Oh well. Let's see how this plays out. "Follow the yellow brick road," he says lightly.

The cat and Alice both stop and look at him and say together, "Don't ever mention that here, again, ever, ever, ever."

"Okay, okay, wow, don't bite my head off," Rick says, hands up in acknowledgement looking at the cats teeth... To say nothing of Alice's.

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Artie is all attention, "Alice? Hey, this is getting interesting."

Alice, Rick and Pangerban stop in front of Blanche and Artie.

There is a distinct silence as Blanche and Alice stare at each other. Blanche says to Pangerban, "So you brought them here? Thanks a lot."

To Alice she snarls, "And who is *this* human, another one of your losers? I was just beginning to enjoy myself for the first time in a *long* time!"

Pangerban just looks at Alice.

Alice states, "I ordered him to."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, Alice. I haven't seen you in -- how long is it? And now you lock the place down and show up ruining my good time with..." She looks at Artie, then at Rick. She stops what she was going to say.

Alice looks at Artie and then looks at Rick. They have a lot in common.

Twins or the same mail man Blanche thinks.

Alice thinks brothers separated at birth or cousins?

Rick and Artie stare at each other aware at the startling resemblance. Rick breaks the ice, "Same mail man?"

Blanche chokes on a laugh. She thinks to herself, he's got a sense of humor, not bad.

"I was wondering the same thing," says Artie laughing. "I've had something like this happen before where I was mistaken for someone else, but this is the first time I met who I would consider my close twin."

"Me too." says Rick.

"I'll ask you about how you got here later. I think these two have some words or something to say in private," Artie mentions and points to a spot away, out of hearing distance from the two women. He is more familiar with the goings on than Rick.

Artie looks at the women and says to Rick, "Have you notice a resemblance to the paintings by the Swan King with these two?"

If you mean Parkes, yes. They could have been his models. Do you think he's one of them too?"

"I don't know. I just had that idea when I saw the two of them together. Wouldn't that be a hoot, Artie says staring at the two of them. "You want to ask?"

"Later, another time," say Rick amazed at the likeness to the artist's paintings these two beauties have. "Do you think they can hear us?"

"Anything is possible. Trust me," says Artie.

"I'd believe anything at this point."

Blanche and Alice look over at the two men, point, laugh and nod in agreement about something. After a long while and what appears to be some rather animated conversation they hug, kiss and walk toward Rick and Artie.

Blanch looks at Artie and says, "You are welcome here any time you wish. I would like to see you more often. And congratulations, Rick. Alice told me, she has nothing but good intentions. Uncle has given his blessings."

Rick is not sure how to take all this. He thinks to himself and says, "I guess you don't argue with a genie that has a crush on you, especially when you are just as nuts about her. Yes, thank you."

Artie shakes his hand. "By the way, where do you live, up there?" and he points.

"State College, PA. And you?"

"Washington DC metro," says Artie. "Or, wherever," he corrects himself, looking at Blanche.

THE END

Author's Note: This story is make-believe, or maybe fake-believe. All characters (except the Orange Tabby), events and locations are total fabrications. Any resemblance to anyone living, dead, mythological or otherwise is purely coincidental. Trademarks if used, are the property of their owners and do not imply anything, neither endorsement or total repulsion regarding this fantasy story.

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Bio: Richard Tornello is a business owner/consultant/technical recruiter with 28+ years experience, married and kept by one very neurotic cat Stella. He has a degree from Rutgers University in Asian Studies. Richard's poetry and fiction has appeared a number

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