

## Chapter One

“Points will be deducted for all wounds taken and awarded for each defender wounded,” the game master drones on, dictating the rules, “The group with the highest score at the end of the weekend will receive a complimentary stay at the Renaissance Hotel and Gaming World. One last note: there will be no battle magic used in the Renaissance Games.”

*Bonnggggg...Bonngggg...*

The second alarm, tolling in the distance, leads to profound silence: I hear the whispered breaths of the four men accompanying me as I shake off the memory of our first meeting. Shock turns into comprehension, as Darren unsheathes the tinfoil sword from its cardboard scabbard. Stretching out long legs, he takes the stairs three at a time, loping downward. The mousy-haired professional pauses long enough to shout over his shoulder, “Two gongs... attack at the front door!”

The fanning stairway broadens. Ten-foot oak doors loom before us, barring the entrance. Huffing, our band of out-of-shape would-be heroes heaves a collective sigh of relief: The entryway is secure.

Scanning the foyer we find only a reception table and the game master who will record our progress. “Not even enough time to get to know each other and a blasted bells sounds!” George grouses, his eyes darting daggers at the game master.

I grind my teeth as my hand snakes out to twitch his shirt, “You’re coming out of character in game-time. Do you want to lose points for something like that?” George’s lips twist into a disdainful sneer.

“Awesome dude, we beat the invaders,” Chad’s warm smile encourages me to shrug off George’s attitude, “Should we wait or, like, go out to meet them?” Comprehension dawns: those blonde streaks Chad sports are from hanging out at the beach with a long board.

We ease past the table with Chad, Darren and Allen to one side and George on the other. I bring up the rear, hanging back. Cursing under my breath, I whisper, “I can’t believe they outlawed offensive magic in this game. What good is being a mage if you can’t use battle spells?”

A metallic squeal pierces the stillness as the front doors ease open. Bronze hockey-masks hide the enemy’s identities but their brown garments mark our foes as gremlins. The enemy slides single file through the cracked entryway before splitting into two groups. They charge our motley group of stunned heroes shrieking like deranged cats.

Allen shoves his way past Chad, knocking the bleached-blond to his knees, as he slashes at the closest invader. Over eager to make his first score, Allen misses the intruder by a good six inches. Before he recovers from his vigorous swing, a gremlin scores a hit on his sword-arm. Taking the weapon in his left hand, he swings ineffectively before diving for protection under the hearty oak desk in the center of the foyer. George joins him under the table after receiving a similar disabling blow to his sword arm.

Swarmed by a group of gremlins, Darren and Chad turn back to back. The duo manages to keep the enemy at bay, scoring some hits as they shield each other’s position.

Jabbing at a pair of attackers with my staff, I focus on the gremlins determined to take my weapon. A firm tap on my elbow lets me know I have been ambushed from behind by a third attacker. Instinctively, I drop my magician’s rod, knowing I cannot wield the staff one-handed.

Using the table as a prop I kick like a mule, planting both feet in the chest of the invader, taking him down and out for the count. *Six months at kick-boxing class are paying off...*

Seeing a mage without a stave, the other gremlins rush to score their first kill. Taking flight like a startled gazelle, I mount the table. I pivot like a gymnast kicking at the leader's head. Knowing George and Allen are pinned under my position, I make my way around the table, striking out with a booted heel at each bronze mask. The drab antagonists take a step back.

The game master scribbles furiously on his notepad while the gremlins huddle momentarily. Breaking apart with loud fiendish gibbering, they dash up the stairs. I smile, long legs pounding the floor as I race after them with the other defenders in tow. *If only Tony could have seen that! I wish he had followed us here instead of going back for seconds at the breakfast buffet...*

Darren, uncharacteristically enthusiastic, interrupts my silent musing, "Now that was fun! I got two. What did you get?"

"Two, maybe three. I think one might have been fatal..." *Boonnnngg*. The gong drowns out the rest of Chad's recount.

"One alarm for the dining hall..." Darren roars. "They're attacking the breakfast gathering!" Shrieks and peals of laughter echo as we dash into the entryway at the top of the fan-shaped stairway.

Dashing into the dining hall, I see my husband looking up from what is left of a breakfast that has lost its appeal. Eggs, sausage, toast, and chocolate milk – what could be finer? But not all mixed together! A quick leap keeps the engineer from wearing the mess as a gremlin strikes the jumbled tray. Our crusading quintet dressed in white tops decorated with distinctive blue sashes races across the dining room. Tony follows at a jog, anxious to see me in action.

Making two quick turns, following the screams and shouts, we enter the left wing of the domestic quarters. I lope down the hallway, head swiveling from side to side. All five players skid to a halt. This corridor is a dead-end, with no gremlins in sight.

“Shit!” I pace like a caged animal. “Shit, shit... SHIT!! We’ve taken a wrong turn! Let’s backtrack. If they are still here then they can’t be far.”

*Bong. Bong. Bong.*

“That’s the end of Round One.” My brows draw down at being thwarted in my revenge. “Rebecca, wasn’t it?” I nod, trying to shake off my irritation. Darren smiles at my newbie enthusiasm, “they usually don’t expect you to kill them all. It’s time to see how we scored.” We do an about face, making our way back to the foyer at a more sedate pace.

“You’ve been here before?” Allen’s inquiry draws the attention of the entire group.

“Yeah, I’m a real veteran...” Darren grunts.

“How long do they give us to heal our party?” The needs of the patients are never far from Chad’s thoughts, even in a game of fantasy. “We could use the time to work out a game plan for the next round.”

“They claim each campaign will be original,” the gangly engineer shrugs.

“I bet the King is pissed. We made a real mess of breakfast. What will that take off our score?” George, an accountant, mentally tallies up the scores as he and Allen discuss their wounds and possible hits.

I glance over my shoulder at Tony. Sharing a smile with my husband, I try to portray a little of the optimism that comes so naturally to him, “Surely they didn’t expect us to kill all of ‘em. I got one; wounded a couple of others.”

“Well I got at least that many,” George harrumphs, reaching for the scorecard lying on the reception table. Reading the results of the first round of Live Action Gaming, the number cruncher is fractionally disgruntled, “72 out of 100 points! That friggin’ game master has his head up his ass!”

“With three out of five of us injured? We’re lucky they only docked us fifteen points for each hit,” a wide slash of white stretches across Allen’s ebony face, “Good thing two of our characters claim to be ambidextrous.” With a scarecrow body and balding head, his levity takes some of the punch out of the score that is purely average.

Glancing up, seeing Tony striding my way, I hiss with frustration, “If they had only let me use some of my spells, any of them, I would have had them contained in the foyer! Those Gremlins would’ve been no match for a force field or even a wide-ranged stun spell.”

A thundering clamor fills the air around us. Startled, I lock eyes with the engineer whose ring graces my left hand. Hair on the back of my neck prickles, goose bumps surge across my body as a white flash consumes the world around me.

Color seeps back into my vision, inky blotches fading from the world around me. Amid the cloudy haze in my mind a slow but startling realization of my surroundings penetrates my thoughts.

*Have my eyes recovered from the lightning strike?* The room is darker. The tingling that set every hair on end hasn’t entirely left. My nerves are on a caffeine high: awake, alive, and sensitive beyond belief. Bewildered, I glance at the long pole grasped firmly in my right hand.

*A staff? I left mine leaning on the table...*

My eyes flutter and my brain bogs down like a sports car in a mud pit. Through the fog in my brain I take in the walls around me. *A real torch? The thing gives off more smoke than light.*

Faint predawn-beams slanting from narrow windows are the only other source of illumination. We are in a round chamber formed out of dark rock, not the granite wallpaper covering the hotel walls. *What part of the Renaissance Resort is this... the dungeon?*

Baffled, I turn to the man standing next to me, "Allen? Your clothes...?" My mouth hangs slack as my brain catches up. A deep knowing settles into my soul, warring with logic and reason. *That can't be Allen...*

I just met Allen when we were placed on the same team for Mischief, Mayhem, and Murder: a role-playing game at the one and only Renaissance Hotel and Gaming World, but I am positive this is not the same man. Yet something inside me insists that it is. *This is nuts!*

Allen is in his early to mid-thirties, five foot ten, black, balding, skinny and altogether an unremarkable guy. Like me, he was dressed in blue jeans and a white shirt with a blue sash around his waist. *No way this is the same guy.* But deep inside I *know* Allen is standing next to me although this guy is a twenty-something year old who could easily win the Mr. America contest: over six-feet tall, smooth midnight skin over broad handsome features, full sensuous lips, raven braids halfway down his back and weightlifting shoulders.

He's wearing what will be a big hit at the Renaissance festival: authentic breastplate over chain mail, complete with a set of gauntlets.

"Who else would it be...." the question trails off as his mind registers the sound issuing forth. Allen's voice has a distinct nasal ring, which is far different from the satin smooth and honey sweet tone this man used.

A shouting match ensues when the three other strangers standing with us in the center of this bizarre room recover their voices at the same time. A very, very short, black bearded man –

*That's Darren?* – bellows to be heard over Allen, only to be paralyzed by the deep rumbling of his own words.

“What the...” begins the seven foot, wire-thin man with pale alabaster skin. The soft soprano tone of the man - my brain insists is George - silences the question.

“Will every one chill for a minute!” Chad steps into the middle of the group trying to bring reason to a totally unreasonable situation.

*Now that voice I know!* But the sandy-haired, short and stocky medical student is not standing before us. This man is much taller than the Chad of old, built like a quarterback, dirty blond hair darkened to a chestnut color, but it is still undeniably Chad. There is no mistaking the similarities in the face. It is as if an artist moved the best qualities – the kind, compassionate eyes, the straight nose – to a more suitable frame, just touching-up where needed.

Something so familiar yet still completely unexplainable achieves the quiet Chad demands. No one dares intrude on the stillness as the unmistakable squeal of a rusty-hinged door echoes into the chamber like a scene from a bad horror flick.

Carrying a metal pot with a wick burning in front of a shiny metal plate, a medieval guard steps through the dark doorway. *My God, a stairway around the room... without a guardrail! Talk about a lawsuit waiting to happen!*

A robed man and a He-Man looking character enter behind the quintessential soldier holding the antiquated lantern. Light glints off gleaming hilts. *Are those swords made of metal?*

I shake my head trying to dislodge the illusion. *Surely, if this were a dream I would not be thinking in the archaic clichés Tony teases me about? Everything, including my speech, would be more gothic.*

I strain to catch what the new arrivals are saying, “Merithin, nemdinn sund i minna enn korter getur petta ekki bidid?” my brow furrows with irritation as I realize the futility of eavesdropping.

Out of pure frustration I follow my gut instinct, sarcastically muttering words that blaze into being inside my head, “Holy shit and holy cow! That’s a foreign language they are speaking now. What I don’t have, and I really need, is to know these words instantly.”

Lifting my hand in the direction of the robed figure marching down the stairs, I finish the rhyme with a sigh emanating from the depths of my soul, “I am in a hurry and assume its fine, so copy the info from that mind to mine.”

Fierce tingling, cascading from my head to my toes, causes my jaw to hang slack. My eyes widen further when blue light arcs from my hand to the robed figure, retuning back to me before I blink an eye.

“Your Highness, I assure you, the War Council will be very interested. I think I have summoned what will be the answer to the demons plaguing our kingdom,” The robed elder pleads with He-Man, “When I meditated on the need to conquer our foes and performed a scrying, I was shown these five warriors in the dream-state. I have never accomplished a seeking across the planes so quickly as when I sought and found these soldiers. I know I was destined to use my Summoning for this purpose.”

“Merithin, what can five men do against the legions of demons besieging us? I have studied war all my life. I do not see how these five men, or even five hundred men, will be of that much assistance!” the princely hulk sulks.

Thoughts fly quicker than superman running from a kryptonite hailstorm... *I can understand them! How? Was it that awful rhyme and that blue light? What else could it have been? Hold on a minute... I’m in a robe and carrying a staff, surrounded by an armed entourage...*

Glancing to my right, I see our hosts have made it halfway down the stairs. *I'm running out of time!*

“Humph.” My brow crinkles as a thought occurs, *If I'm a mage with magical powers... how 'bout another spell? Hell, it's worth a shot.*

“Well here I am and really confused,  
With this mess, I feel totally abused.  
I'm calling a 'time-out' as anyone would,  
Using my magic, as you know I should.  
Time will speed up, but only for me.  
Until I count deliberately, one-two-and-three.”

Intuitively I give another push from within. My thoughts center on the movie about the guy whose molecules sped up so fast that time around him seemed to stand still. An orgasmic tingling sensation turns my palms numb as a blue flash tinges the world around me.

“I did it! Oh—my—God...I really did it!” I shriek. The silence of the room, void of even the melody of the flickering flame, causes my voice to echo. “Now that I have a little time let's sort things out,” I mumble to no one in particular.

Taking a closer look at my companions, the solution hits me like a freight truck. I step over to the reed-slender giant to confirm my suspicions by moving the white locks, revealing pointed ears. When I take my hand away, the ivory strands stick straight out instead of falling back into place. *It is George. Ok this is just too weird... Let's see if I can wake up the others.*

“Like the guy with the watch in the movie I've seen,

I have gotta have help from the rest of the team.

So with a quick touch unfreeze them I will,

That way they can help me, the blanks to fill.”

*Oh great, now I'm sounding like Yoda. I hope it worked.* This time my hands feel as if they are light as a cloud when an azure glow surrounds them, sinking into the skin. My lips twist in a wry smile. I place my staff on the ground and begin one more rhyme:

“To grab the spotlight when they awake,

A mirror from this staff I now make.”

A bolt of blue arcs from my hand, encompassing the rod. I hardly notice the pins and needles as the wood splits down the middle contorting and stretching. It rises from the ground, a gaping hole framed by oak. Blue fog congeals in the gap. In a matter of seconds a six foot by six foot mirror stands in place of the staff.

Walking over to the group, I stride toward Chad first. *At least I can reason with him.* My fingers graze the hand he rests on his sword hilt. “Have we hit the Twilight Zone or what?”

“Rebecca?” the questions tumble out of his mouth like water from a broken dam, “You are so short... where'd you get the shiny robe? How'd you change so fast?”

When the flow of confusion ebbs, he glances around the room, choking on whatever he was about to say. The frozen world renders him speechless.

“I'm not short, you're tall,” as I pull him over to the mirror, Chad gapes like a newly caught bass, “Listen for a minute, that is all I ask...”

“If you can explain any of this, I am all ears,” the armored man’s eyes rove the reflection of his enhanced physique.

“You remember our gaming characters? Do our companions seem familiar? Did you hear the thunder and see that weird light?” I pause for a breath. He gives a cautious nod. “The guys on the stairs, I heard them talking. The robed one is a mage and I think the other is royalty. The mage said something about summoning us from another plane, as in... dimension. Call me crazy, but I *don’t* think we are on Earth anymore.” Filling my lungs, I prepare more evidence.

Before I can utter a syllable I feel confusion ebbing from the man next to me, as palpable as a shout of denial. Chad thrust his hands out before him, “Whoa, what do you mean you heard them? You can understand what they said? Whatever language they speak, it doesn’t sound like anything I have ever heard. I’ve traveled Europe and parts of Asia, know Latin and some French, the intonation is similar but I can’t understand a word.”

I nod encouragingly, “I used magic, actual like for real magic, to learn their language. Look, I’ll wake the others from the time-spell if you’ll keep them quiet long enough for me to explain what I have pieced together.”

A knowing smile brightens Chad’s handsome features as we maneuver the mirror into place. I move from one familiar stranger to the next, tapping each in turn. My new ally trails behind pointing out the mirror, making sure they notice their unrecognizable reflection.

“You guys want to know what the hell is going on here?” Chad’s voice rings out as I wake George last, “Rebecca is one step ahead of us.”

Taking a deep breath, I clear my throat, drawing their attention from the mirror, “I have cast a spell to give us a few minutes to figure things out. Where we are I don’t know, but let me tell you what I do know. We have been summoned to this world by that mage,” I tilt my head

toward the stairs, “across a transdimensional barrier. This kingdom is under attack. The mage’s meditation and scrying told him we are the answer to a war they can’t win on their own. So he brought us here.”

“And how, oh wise one, do you know all this?” pipes-up the same old pessimistic George in a voice pitched a few octaves higher.

“Take a look around, it should be obvious,” a sigh escapes while I attempt to reign in my impatience. Stepping in front of the mirror, I draw their attention to the object once more.

“My gaming character was an ArchMage. Chad was the MasterHealer. Allen certainly lives up to ‘Charles the Prince Charming.’ George, have you noticed your ears? The Druid Elf lives. And Darren, wasn’t your crusader a Dwarf. Is this what you all envisioned your gaming characters to be?” Slowly, four very stunned men nod.

The rest of the puzzle falls into place. “Somehow the mage must have scried and found us role-playing. When he pulled us from our dimension, the spell reconfigured us to fit this world according to the mind-set and powers of our adventure characters!” Sensing disbelief overwhelming the minds of some of my companions, I stumble in mid-thought.

“Like whoa man... That ain’t possible! I couldn’t even score a hit on those damn gremlins with a *fake* sword. Man, there is absolutely no friggin’ way I am a swordsman. You can’t gain instant knowledge, much less skills!” Allen’s cheery demeanor evaporates under the blazing glare of chaos that sorcery and magic invokes. “There gotta be a logical explanation... this is just a dream. That’s it...just a very realistic dream.”

I recall Allen stating he was a program engineer. Science majors are so grounded in facts that explaining this world of magic to him is going to be a royal pain in the butt.

“How do you think I figured out what they said? I used a spell to learn their language in less time than it has taken me to explain it to you.” I feel Allen’s pig-headed logical stubbornness as tangibly as a shouted refusal. I grind my teeth muttering, “*Helvitis asni (stupid fool)...*” *Do they think I can hold this spell forever? We don’t have time for this bullshit.*

“Fine, you think this might be a dream. That is understandable; after all, this is pretty surreal. Just don’t start acting like this is not your life. If you charge up those stairs, trying to slice your way free of this dream, someone is bound to get in a lucky shot. Or maybe that mage has a lightning bolt with your name on it,” I jab Allen’s broad chest. “Will you feel the pain as cold steel pierces warm flesh or will you wake up? Is there a chance, no matter how unlikely, that dead will be dead?” I pin him with my best motherly gaze, then turn to include the rest of the gang. “Until we have absolute proof, we had better start acting like this is our reality.”

I spin on my heel, pointing to our approaching host once again. “They brought us here to be some sort of heroes in a war we know nothing about. Until we find out exactly what is going on, we had better get our act together and play the part of the people they expect us to be!”

A knowing forms deep inside: high intuition points have granted me a certainty beyond certainty. “We were ready for a weekend of live action role-playing. Now, we might be playing for our lives. We can’t afford to take the chance that this is not our new reality. If we wake up, then one of us is going to get a good laugh. Until then, better safe than dead.” Heads nod so I get down to business, “First off, we need to know everyone’s character strengths.”

“Who died and made you the first woman President?” George manages to sound insulted, arrogant, and snide all at once, “We may be stuck in the Middle Ages, but we can still operate like a democracy. The first thing we should do is elect a leader, someone to speak for us as a

group. We should introduce ourselves and the characters we created, their strengths and their weaknesses. Then we will vote on who we think should represent us. I will go first.”

“I received a promotion to Assistant Manager of our accounting department; that means I’ve got great people skills. I am also at least ten years older than all of you: more world experience. Keep that in mind. From now on I am Allinon. As a druid I have an affinity with nature. The magic I possess deals with living things as well as enhancing the properties of herbs. Right now I can tell by the crisp feel of the air that winter is almost at an end. I am a MasterArcher,” drawing his slender, delicate looking weapon for emphasis he continues, “and a MasterSwordsman. I have never handled a sword before, but this feels completely natural.” Sheathing the long blade he makes a lame attempt at humor, “If the world has gone mad it has taken me with it.”

Chad steps up before Allinon can elaborate further, “Jamison the MasterHealer. I am also a MasterSwordsman and Master of the Martial Arts. This being my first gaming character I hadn’t decided on anything else.”

“I am Charles,” says the raven swordsman, “I am a Paladin with high charisma points. Like the typical paladin, my aura acts as a defensive barrier, slowing down attacks and reducing the damage I take in a fight. Also I am practically impossible to poison. Unlike the typical paladin, I can’t work even the most basic healing spell. Due to my character’s lack of....ummm ...piousness,” his leer leaves no doubt that promiscuity held a large part in the penalization, “the gods have taken that ability from me. Life’s not all bad though, I have worked at weapon skills instead. I have mastered all known weapons and some my gaming group invented.”

Darren speaks next, “Jerik the Dwarf. No magic ‘cept what I use as MasterSmith. Dwarves are incredibly resistant to sorcery and poison. That axe,” he points to the weapon strapped to his

back, “is my weapon of mastery. My character has one unique ability: besides being able to enchant weapons, I have got a slight telepathic skill. Telepaths are almost unheard of in dwarves, but our Dungeon Master allowed an exception because of a history I wrote. The short version: Jerik comes from a colony of Dwarves who have developed this trait. It can only be used with other telepaths.”

*Why does the Dwarf seem so right for Darren?* The engineer has undergone the most dramatic change. Jerik has morphed from a six-foot tall brunette to a four-and-a-half-foot tall, black-bearded, axe-swinging dwarf. Still, I have no problem associating the new Jerik with the old Darren I met this morning.

Breathing deep to focus my mind, the world becomes clear as a crystalline lake, “Call me Reba. Not only am I an ArchMage, but I have also mastered the dagger and the staff as well as all known martial arts. I can communicate telepathically, too.”

*“Jerik, can you hear me?”* I send a tendril of thought to the dwarf. His bushy brows shoot up to his hair line. “That might come in handy if we ever split up. I have only the most basic healing skill, but I have above average empathy points and extremely high intuition points. Having said this let me tell you why I should be our leader. I feel like these people are good people and I feel like we should help them. I also have a strong feeling I should act as our leader.”

Stepping in front of me, Allinon prevents me from detailing my abilities, “Now that we know who we have become, who do think should be leader, me or her?” adding snidely, “Remember the period we appear to be in is a Medieval society; men are usually dominate.”

Jerik grunts, “Elf, you have a point. You’ve got my vote.”

“I have to agree with him,” Charles apologizes, “I haven’t ever heard of a woman leader...”

A feeling of unease winds its way up my spine, “We can act like a democracy, but forget equal rights...”

Allinon cuts off my rebuttal, “Then it is settled,” “I’ll address the prince. Reba, if you will remove the mirror?”

*God I wish I could blast him, but we might need him later...* Growling I stalk over to the mirror muttering,

“Ab-bra-ca-da-bra and al-la-ka-zam,

Turn back to a staff for this irritating man.”

The mirror begins its metamorphosis, shrinking back to its original shape. Even with my back turned, their simultaneous intake of breath cannot be missed. I time the retrieval of the stave with the completion of the spell.

“Nice,” the elf smirks as if he had personally cast the spell, “Now what’s your secret to learning this language so quickly.”

Not trusting myself to speak to the man I close my eyes then begin to chant:

“The language of this land I have gained,

Shall be passed to the rest of my gang.

If heroes of this world you are destined to be,

I must pass to you what is inside of me.”

Even with the ambiguous words, the meaning is clear. The enchantment is so strong goose bumps surge to life. Tickling energy races from my outstretched arm to surround the four men.

Wiping sweat off my forehead, I turn to our leader, "I'm not sure how long I can hold the slow-time spell. You ready to meet these guys?"

"Not quite yet." Allinon fills us in on some courtly details, then insists on a final arrangement, "Form a half circle behind me." When we are in place he jerks his head at me, "Now release the spell."

The knot of unease hasn't yet left my middle as I intone, "One, two, and three..."