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Note: This is a rough draft. Comments are welcome. You may email me at robin@robindowens.com OR comment on my blog <http://www.robindowens.blogspot.com>

Thumps and bumps woke Amber in the night. Her heart pounded, home invaders! The pups sprang from her bed and shot down the hall, barking. She snatched at the phone, pressed 9-1-1, started shouting over the dispatcher. "This is number seven--"

The ceiling light flicked on and a brownie appeared on the end of her bed. The phone slipped from her grip.

He wasn't Pred from next door. This one wasn't as skinny, though he was still thin. His face was more wrinkled --with lines of bad humor. His head between his large triangular ears was black. "Go ahead," the brownie said. "Let's see some fun." He went transparent.

Amber fumbled for the phone. "Never mind," she panted into it. "False alarm. My...a friend came in."

"Are you sure you're all right?" asked the dispatcher.

"Fine. Fine," Amber said.

"We have a fix on your phone and will send a squad car by."

The brownie opened and closed his hands, fingers stiff, mumbling something. Again her phone dropped.

"Changed the signal. They'll go to the wrong address, blocks away from Mystic Circle," he sneered.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Amber asked.

His features drew together and darkened with anger. His large triangular ears shook, probably with fury. She felt at a disadvantage in bed so she hopped out. "Who are--"

"I heard you the first time. Tiro. I gotta live with you." He jumped from the bed, making gargle noises that might be brownie cursing.

"Tiro?" Amber asked.

"My name, human." The brownie stalked over and walked around her. She turned in place to keep an eye on him. He opened his mouth and curled his tongue...like a cat using a sixth sense.

"The Mistweaver brownies were right. A wretched Cumulustre descendant. I thought your whole line had died out from stupidity four generations ago."

Amber crossed her arms. The March night was cold since she kept the heat low. Her nightgown was flannel, but her feet were bare. "I beg your pardon," she said in a voice as chilly as her feet.

She heard the grinding of his teeth, then he flung his head back. "And you look as stupid as all the rest. Smell like it, too. A curse breaker, right? And when you 'help' someone you age? And your body is nearly a decade older than your true age?"

He knew her magic. He knew her family. What else did he know and what could she learn from him?

She sighed a "Yes."

Tiro stomped to the middle of the room. "If you human women of the Cumulustre bloodline had learned your lesson, I wouldn't be here. Bound to watch over you and serve you --those're my ancient orders from the elf." Stomp. "Can't contact Cumulustre without

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permission. Those damn Mistweaver brownies won't talk to him, either. Stuck." A hard jump on her floor.

"Watch over me why?"

He shot a finger at her. "'Cause you're a curse breaker and you age when you do magic. Cumulustre wants you watched until all of you are gone."

Amber opened her mouth.

"Stop pestering me," he snapped, whiskery eyebrows dipping.

She took a different angle. "So are you going to fall down and froth at the mouth?"

"No," but he stomped again. "But you're going to press your luck and break curses and age and die before your time, 'helping others,' like all of your ilk. Damn women."

Now ice chilled her insides as well as the late winter air wrapping around her. She was afraid he was right.

"Never saw a curse you didn't want to break. Have to help." He barked a laugh and the puppies yipped louder, pushing against him. He rubbed each of their heads and didn't move an inch when they bumped against him. "Stupid," he repeated, staring with a considering eye. "You look softer than most. You'll probably go fast."

"I don't think so." She cleared her throat, knowing she shouldn't ask, but couldn't help herself. "You can't help me with my gift?"

Tiro smiled with all his pointy teeth and Amber took a step back. He looked more than happy, positively gleeful. "Give me permission and I can call Cumulustre and all your problems will be over."