

ENCHANTMENT PLACE

EDITED BY
Denise Little

DAW BOOKS, INC.
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, FOUNDER

375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

ELIZABETH R. WOLLHEIM
SHEILA E. GILBERT
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<http://www.dawbooks.com>

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INTRODUCTION

Denise Little

Shopping is one of those activities that, depending upon the people involved, can split up a family, destroy a relationship, perfect a day, revive a shattered spirit, and/or save a marriage. It all depends on who's doing it, the company they keep, and the goal they have in mind. Pair a shopaholic and a mall hater for a crawl through a suburban shopping enclave, and the end result can literally be murder. On the other hand, show a depressed shoe lover a big spring sale at Macy's, and it may save that person from a life-threatening funk.

That dichotomy has particular meaning for me and my sister. My sister is a former beauty queen and I ran retail bookstores for fifteen years. My sister believes in shopping as therapy. I avoid it like a contagious illness unless it involves food, books, or toys. On those things, I run wild. But as long as I get my bookstore fix, it's an activity that my sister and I can share—our tastes are different enough that we cherish the things we can do together. A few years ago, as my sister and I were crashing through the mall crowds together during a post-holiday sale, I wondered aloud what kind of people shopped for pleasure. My sister replied, "I wonder what kind of people don't."

At that point, my head filled with images of the kinds of people who might have trouble shopping at a standard mall. I've been immersed in speculative fiction since I was four, so the ideas that ran through my head shared a certain otherworldliness: vampires frying under the ubiquitous skylights and avoiding the mirrors everywhere (not to mention the wafting scent of garlic from the mall food court), werewolves put off by the unavoidable perfume squirters at the cosmetic counters, witches who needed the kinds of ingredients and pets that no standard mall stocked, and so on.

I shared my thought with my sister, who has no patience for whimsy. "Let them get their own mall!" she said.

That's where the seeds of *Enchantment Place* were born. Every time I read a paranormal romance, an urban fantasy novel, or a fairy-tale pastiche, I have a vision of the story denizens flopped out of their living rooms, wondering, "But where will we shop?"

This book's the answer to my silly flights of fancy. I think it may be a personal favorite. I hope you enjoy the mix as much as I did.

SHINING ON

Mary Jo Putney

A New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today bestselling author, Mary Jo Putney was born in upstate New York with a reading addiction, a condition for which there is no known cure. Her entire writing career is an accidental byproduct of buying a computer for other purposes. Over the years, she has evolved from Jane Austen-ish Regency romances to historical fantasy. Her releases in 2008 include a new historical romantic fantasy, A Distant Magic, and the paperback release of The Marriage Spell in June. She knows way too much about Star Trek, and she almost always has cats in her stories.

My Uncle Joe used to say that you could tell a lot about a man by his shoes. He should know—I spent most of his life shining shoes for businessmen who wanted to look spiffy for their next meeting.

Me, I chose combat boots. Thought I'd be brave and noble. Ended up in a place with too much sand and heat and things that went BANG! 'Nuff said.

When I got out of the service, I wasn't sure what to do next, since most of my job skills are frowned on in private life. And my family in Cincinnati was making me nuts. Nice folks, you know, but they kept hovering. Worrying about me. Like I was going to explode or something. Frankly, I could see their point. So I went to Chicago, where we'd lived when I was a kid.

Uncle Joe was long gone—he'd been a great uncle, maybe two greats. But being there in his hometown made me think of him and of polishing shoes. So when I went to an employment agency, I put down "shoe shining" as one of my skills, since I used to help Uncle Joe, and he told me stories in the quiet times. He'd fought in The Big One. I fought in The Wrong One.

Anyhow, I got called in by an employment counselor, a middle-aged babe with a brisk tongue and nice eyes. She checked that I was really Roy Blake, then said, "Since you're a veteran, I could easily place you with a security firm."

I'd thought about being a rent-a-cop, for about two seconds. "No, thanks. What else do you have?"

She glanced down at a pile of papers. "If you're looking for something different, we have an opening for someone to run a shoeshine and grooming station at Enchantment Place. It's an exclusive boutique mall with very specialized shops and clientele."

"Grooming? Like combing dogs?" I liked dogs and critters in general, but I wasn't trained in fluffing them.

"The listing isn't very detailed. They do say that they want someone versatile and good at thinking on his feet." She handed me the paper. "You'd be an employee of the mall, with a base salary and a percentage of sales. The position includes an apartment if you need a place to stay."

I did, actually. I'd forgotten how expensive Chicago was. I studied the income estimates. "If they're telling the truth, this is really good money. But the listing is three months old. Why are they having trouble filling the job?"

"Because they insist on having a combat veteran." Her eyes glimmered. "Which you are. Plus, you know how to shine shoes. Are you interested, Mr. Blake?"

The job listing roused my curiosity, and the work sounded peaceful, so I decided to check the place

out. Which is how at the end of the afternoon I was standing in the living room of a really nice or bedroom apartment with an amazing view of the Loop and the lake. I'd passed the initial interview—apparently the combination of combat veteran and shoeshiner was rare—and now Missy LaFey, the assistant mall manager, was showing me the apartment that came with the job.

“Would this be satisfactory, Mr. Blake?” Missy asked. She was a cute little thing, so light on her feet that she hardly seemed to touch the floor.

I didn't reply at first because I was staring through the picture window at the setting sun. The location, twenty stories up in the high rise above the mall, was worth a million bucks, and the view of the winter landscape made me glad to be inside and warm. “The apartment is great,” I said. “But what are you offering housing to a low-level employee like me? I'd think this place could be rented for a ton of money.”

“It could, but for the kind of work you're going to be doing, we need very special employees. No one is 'low-level' for that work. Enchantment Place is unique, and our customers expect a high level of service. People like you.” Her smile was dazzling. “Giving mall employees special perks is a way of avoiding high turnover. Will you take the job, Mr. Blake?”

Sounded like I'd be a servant for a bunch of rich snobs, not my favorite kind of people. But the work would be easy, and I loved this apartment. I could always leave if I hated the job. “I'll give it a try. But why am I a member of the security staff?”

She chose her words carefully. “Some of our customers are very unusual. They need to be handled with care and sensitivity. It's expected that you will help out in whatever ways seem necessary in the course of your day.”

In other words, there were rich spoiled brats who couldn't just be tossed out on their rear ends. Fair enough. I was good at tossing, but I could be patient for the kind of money and housing I would get at this honkin' upscale mall. Probably my size had a lot to do with being hired—at six four and with muscles on my muscles, I could quash a fight just by showing up and asking if there was a problem.

Missy pulled out a key ring. “Here are keys for the apartment, the employee entrance to the mall, and the shoeshine station. I suggest you take time familiarizing yourself with the materials. Some are quite unusual.”

Shoe polish was shoe polish. So it came in fancy colors. Big deal. I was about to ask some more questions, but Missy's cell phone rang. She made an apologetic gesture and answered. Her expression changed. “I'll be right there.”

She snapped the phone shut. “I'm sorry, but I have to go. Meet me at the shoeshine station tomorrow morning at 9:00 and I'll go over everything and introduce you to some of the shop owners. The station is part of the food court and easy to find.”

Before I could answer, she darted out the door. And, swear to God, I *didn't* see her little feet touch the ground.

After Missy had whisked away, I studied the keys, thinking how weird this was. I mean, the deal was great, but for a shoeshine guy? Even a veteran? It sounded too good to be true. Maybe I should check the actual mall out before I moved my stuff here. So far, I'd just seen the management suite. I headed for the elevators.

Enchantment Place was in the late afternoon lull when I entered. Most of the day shoppers were gone, and the after work crowd hadn't rolled in yet. I could see a few people here and there, but no one

was close by.

The food court was to the right, so I turned that way. Missy hadn't been kidding about the place being upscale—it seemed to be all specialty boutiques, each glittering like a jewel. Not a Gap or a t-shirt shop in sight. A place called “A Taste of Spice” had fancy cookware and crystal bowls full of fragrant spices, some of which were glowing faintly. Radioactive nutmeg?

The next shop—I halted. Whoa, baby! Did those discreet gold letters really say “Something different for the vampire who has everything?” I glanced into the shop, but the smoky glass made it impossible to see what kind of products the store carried. Probably it was some sort of gift shop for the rich and jaded.

The food court was amazing, designed like a tropical grotto with a cliff on one side and a waterfall several stories high splashing into a huge rock lined pool. The ceiling was designed to look like the sky, with sunshine and slow moving clouds.

I glanced into the pool. There were some very large . . . things . . . swimming around in the depths. Didn't look like carp to me.

The court had scattered clumps of jungly trees and flowers, and the seating wasn't just little tables and chairs. There were all sizes of benches and some couches that made me think of large, expensive doggy beds. I tried not to think of what spoiled teenagers might get up to in such places. Was part of my job to keep the public spaces decent?

I turned my attention to the food stalls. Again, there were no national chains in sight. One little stall called itself “Blood Wine.” That must be where the Klingon wannabes stopped by for their tomato juice. The idea was a little creepy, but the place was spic and span, and the guy in the back polishing his glasses looked normal enough. Next to it was a coffee shop with the delectable sent of baking cinnamon wafting out.

Ah, there was the shoeshine stand, tucked between the coffee shop and “Kebabistand, for the carnivore in you.” The stand was the old fashioned wooden kind like Uncle Joe had at the train station. Polished mahogany seats were set high so the shoeshiner wouldn't have to bend over, and brass foot rests gleamed like gold. This stand had been cherished for sure.

Supplies were stored in the ends, behind locked doors that opened with the old-fashioned iron key Missy had given me. Inside were neat drawers of different sizes with labels like “polishing cloths,” and “black polish.” I pulled that one out and sure enough, there were little jars of some fancy European brand of polish. I opened one and took a sniff. The familiar, astringent smell took me right back to Uncle Joe and me no higher than the old guy's hip.

Blinking a little too fast, I put that away and checked the other drawers. The shoe polish colors were what I expected, but what the heck was “hoof polish” doing here? I thought of cows being prettied up at country fairs, but this was a sparkly paste with a piney scent. Maybe it was one of those kid things—these days girls seem to sparkle a lot more than when I was in high school.

The next drawer said “beak polish.” Now this was getting strange. I was about to check that one when a voice behind me said, “Finally! I thought they'd never get a new shoeshiner. I need the world right now.”

The back of my neck prickled, because it was a voice, sort of, but I was hearing it inside my head, not with my ears. I turned warily and found a unicorn standing behind me. The size of a large pony, the unicorn—definitely male—was pure white, with a glossy mane and tufted tail. Prettiest critter I've

ever seen, though that long, sharp horn wasn't just decorative.

I swallowed hard, wondering if I'd gone around the bend. But I had an aunt with the Sight, and my travels I'd learned that there are more things under heaven and earth than most of us realize.

Given all the legends about werewolves, vampires, and more, maybe they really did exist and just preferred to keep a low profile. Certainly this unicorn looked as real as my own body. He also had a faint, horsey scent that convinced my nose as thoroughly as the sight of him convinced my eyes.

Missy had said employees needed to be adaptable, and now I understood why. Okay, I was adaptable. "I'd be happy to help, but I'm just starting right this minute, so you'll need to tell me what you'd like."

"No problem. The unicorn hoof and horn polishes are in there." The words rang in my head like chimes as the horn tapped a drawer. Then he stretched out on one of the doggy bed couches.

"There are a couple of different colors here." I showed the unicorn the jars I'd found in the drawers. "Which do you prefer?"

"The silver. The gold is too formal for anything but gala events."

Right. Should've figured that out for myself. I spread the soft polish on the unicorn's hooves, which were indeed a little dingy. Shimmering particles brightened the hooves right up. While I waited for them to dry, I applied polish to that long, sharp horn. After buffing, the hooves and horn shone like rainbowed silver.

The unicorn sighed. "That feels so good. You have nice hands. By the way, my name's Bernie."

"Pleased to meet you, Bernie. I'm Roy."

Bernie rolled off the lounge and preened himself in the tall mirror on the side of the shoeshine stand. "I'm so glad you're here, Roy. My horn hasn't looked this good in weeks." He turned from the mirror. "Put it on my tab."

His tab? "Since you're my first customer, I'm not sure how that works."

"Ah, right." Bernie tapped a button with his horn and the largest panel in the shoe stand rolled up. Inside was a small computer, a cash drawer, and a credit card scanner. "I have an account at the mall that's linked to my bank account," Bernie explained. "All of us who don't have hands do that. Click the icon for 'rates' and you'll get a list that includes hoof and horn polishing. Then go to 'account' and look up Bernie. Write the job up with a 25 percent tip for yourself."

"You're generous," I said as I pulled up the rate screen.

A chuckle rang in my head. "I want us to have a long and happy relationship, Roy." With a jaunty twitch of his tufted tail, Bernie turned and trotted off.

So I was working for a mall that catered to magical customers. Maybe that shop I'd passed really did serve vampires. I suppose the idea should have freaked me out, but after dodging bullets and bombs in combat, pretty much anything was an improvement. If all the customers were as nice as Bernie, I was going to like this job just fine.

I scanned down the rate listings. Hoof and horn rates were straightforward. There were multiple prices for shoe polishing, apparently depending on size. And what was this "Claw sharpen and polish?"

I got serious about exploring the computer screens to see what I might expect. Maybe it would have been easier to wait for the morning meeting with Missy LaFey, but this was just too much fun.

A throaty voice purred, “Hey, sailor.”

“Actually, I was a soldier.” I turned—and froze solid at the sight of the most spectacularly sex babe I’d ever seen in my life. She was curvy as a mountain road and twice as dangerous, with a black dress that must have been sprayed on. Ebony hair tumbled over almost bare shoulders, and her skin was so white that she must wear grade 500 sun block.

“I’m Monica,” she said in that purring voice. “And I need my boots polished.” She swung up onto a seat and set her foot on the rest. Her thigh high boots had six inch heels, and her skirt was slit up *here*.

I swallowed hard, remembering when I’d had to defuse a bomb and me with no training. “Sure you need a shine, Miss? Your boots look perfect.”

“I believe in preemptive polishing. And please, call me Monica. What’s your name?” She had amazing eyes. I couldn’t have told you the color, but I couldn’t look away.

“R—Roy,” I stammered. Though Monica was so hot that she made my palms sweat, my soldier senses were screaming that I should run in the opposite direction.

But I couldn’t bolt, much as I wanted to. Feeling drugged, I pulled out a jar of black polish and applied it to the top of her left foot. “Higher, Roy,” she breathed. “You’re quite the hunk, aren’t you?”

“Not really.” Feeling suffocated, I stroked the polishing cloth over her ankle. She had great legs. Her black boots ended at midthigh, the soft leather slick below her silky skirt.

I was wondering if I could bring myself to polish over her knee to the thigh when a sharp voice said, “Monica, behave yourself!”

A woman charged out of the coffee shop. She wasn’t a shimmering sex goddess. She was tall and brown-haired and looked . . . nice. Her gaze on Monica, she scolded, “You know perfectly well that you aren’t allowed to hit on the employees here.”

Monica looked like an embarrassed school girl. “But I just woke up and I’m *hungry*. I only would have taken a little sip or two, and a fresh drink is so much nicer than bottled.”

“No rationalizing!” The newcomer’s glare was stern. “Do you want to be banned from Enchantment Place forever?”

“I wasn’t thinking!” Expression horrified, Monica yanked her boot from the footrest and leaned forward to say earnestly, “I’m so sorry, Roy. Will you promise not to give me away?”

She reached out and cupped my chin with one pale hand. I almost jumped out of my combat boots. Her fingers were cold. Not cool, like someone with poor circulation, but *cold*. Cold as the grave. And her persuasive smile showed a hint of fangs.

I gasped. “You’re a vampire?”

“Of course.” Monica stood and brushed the wrinkles from her dress. “Maybe you’d like to go together some night when you’re off duty?”

I drew a shaky breath. “I don’t think so.”

“Wuss.” She sniffed and walked away, hips swaying.

A hand closed around my arm. A pleasantly warm hand. “You look like you could use a cup of coffee. Come on over to my place.”

I followed her and the scent of caffeine to the cozy shop next door. She was pretty, in a wholesome girl-next-door way. “You’re not a vampire or unicorn or something else weird, are you?”

She laughed. “I’m as human as you are. My name’s Meg Rudolph, and I make a good cinnamon pastry. I’ll bet you’re the kind of guy who wants his coffee hot and black and nothing fancy added.”

“Yes.” I sank gratefully into a deep couch. “I’m Roy Blake.”

She poured me a cup of steaming black coffee, then added a plate with amazing crumbly pastries I wolfed the coffee and cakes down. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was.

I finished the first cup, so she poured another. Drinking more slowly, I said, “This morning, I didn’t know this place existed. Now I’m in the middle of things I never believed in. I’m not crazy, am I?”

“Not at all,” she said serenely. “I was pretty startled when I started, but the place and the customers are real enough.”

“Just checking.” I decided to eat another pastry. “What’s it like working here?”

“Great.” Meg finished making some fancy coffee drink for herself and sat opposite me. “Sure, the customers are quite a mix, but most of them are very nice. They appreciate having a place where they can be themselves. Be normal. That’s why the management is so particular about who’s hired. You wouldn’t have noticed, but you were magically scanned before they made an offer.”

Now *that* was creepy. “Why did they do that?”

“To see how tolerant and adaptable you are. The owners don’t want anyone here who will make the customers uncomfortable.” Her voice softened. “A lot of our regulars have been persecuted, even hunted down. They deserve a place where they’re accepted.”

I glanced out at the mall, which was getting busier. A group of strangely shaped . . . beings . . . wandered by. Ugly as sin and with warts in places where most people didn’t even have places. Trolls? Ogres? But they were chatting and laughing like any family having a night out. The mama ogre held her little daughter’s hand, and the dad carried a baby in a chest sling. Having had too many people stare at the scar across my left cheek, I could understand why customers wanted to be treated like just folks. “Okay. But why does mall management specify a combat veteran for a shoeshine stand?”

“Sometimes things happen that you wouldn’t see at a regular mall. Employees need to be able to handle calm trouble without hurting anyone and without freaking out themselves.” She chuckled. “Keeps the job from getting boring.”

A group of kids was entering her shop, and a man was approaching the shoeshine station, so I finished my coffee and got to my feet. “Thanks for the explanations, Meg. I’ll see you later.”

The fellow waiting at the stand was a big, burly guy, almost my size, with a restless air. His clothes were good but casual, and his shoes definitely needed cleaning. I said cheerfully, “Hi, I’m Roy, the new shoeshine man. May I help you, sir?”

“I need a shine pretty bad.” He climbed into a seat and put one foot up. His dark brown shoes had been worn through snow and slush, so I pulled out leather cleaner as well as polish. As I went to work, he chatted away in a deep, growly voice. “I’m meeting my boy here in a few minutes, and I’ll have to admit that I’m as nervous as a cat on a stove. Haven’t seen him since he was a cub.”

“You must have missed him.” I’d learned from Uncle Joe that part of the job was listening if a customer seemed to want to talk, as this one did. And I liked to listen.

“I missed a lot while Johnny was growing up. My own damned fault.” He flexed his knuckle nervously—and long, curving claws appeared in front of my nose, emerging from under his regular fingernails. As I flinched back, he said, “Sorry. If you haven’t guessed, I’m a weretiger. Name’s George.”

A weretiger. Named George. Ooohokay. “I hadn’t guessed. Just started here, and I’m still learning.” I gave a final polish to his right shoe and gestured for him to switch feet.

“Then maybe you don’t know much about my kind. Tigers are pretty solitary. We don’t hang out in prides, like the lions, who are a bunch of furry extroverts. When I met my Johnny’s mother, I figured she was just a fling, and I was free to move on. I wasn’t going to have a permanent mate, not me. I’ve hardly seen Johnny since he was born. Now he’s hitting adolescence, and soon he’ll be going through his first Change. A boy needs his father then.” George sighed. “I haven’t been there for him, but I want to be from now on.”

His claws flexed again, and he retracted them hastily. “I shouldn’t be showing claws a week before the full moon. It’s a sign of major nerves.”

“Your boy will be nervous, too, but he’s going to want this meeting to work as much as you do. Reassurance was another part of my job. “Things might be a little tense at first. That’s only natural. I gave a last buff to his shoe. “But with good will on both sides, you’ll work it out.”

“If we do, maybe Deborah will be willing to give me a second chance,” he said softly. “I’ve never met a female to match her in all the years since.”

I didn’t say anything about that. A woman who felt abandoned by her man would require some major convincing, “Do all weres have to change with the full moon?”

“There’s a lot of variety, depending on the kind of were and the individual. Weretigers are usually moon bound, but as you can see, I’m so stressed that I’m doing some unintentional minor changing. A newbie were might change at any time if he’s really terrified. But that’s rare.”

“Good luck with the family meeting. I’ll bet it goes just fine.”

Looking as if he wished he believed me, he paid up and left. A few minutes later, I got another unicorn customer. This one wanted iridescent gold polish on hooves and horns, plus a combing of her mane and tail. She giggled while I worked and said she was going to a club later for some dancing. I met my first unicorn teenager.

The mall got busier as the hour got later. With vampires and other nightwalkers among the customers, that made sense. I stayed pretty busy, too. The magical folk were a well groomed lot and liked to look their best. Plus, it was winter and the weather was messy, so there were others who needed snow and salt removed from their shoes before the leather was ruined.

Between customers, I’d wander into the coffee shop to see Meg. If she wasn’t busy, she’d chat. When customers lined up, she showed me how to make mocha lattes. Sergeant Roy Blake, barista. Who’d have guessed?

I saw George meet his family on the far side of the food court, under a cluster of tall palms. The woman was a real looker—lean and taut and, yes, she moved lithely as a tiger. The kid was maybe thirteen or so, and he looked as nervous as his dad. I didn’t have to be magical to see the tension among the three. I silently wished them luck.

My shift at the shoeshine stand ended at 9:00 PM, so I was ready to wrap it up by then. I locked the supply doors and headed over to see Meg. She was talking to a young fellow with the very pale skin.

realized was a mark of a vampire. She waved when I came in. “Roy, meet Josh. He’s my night guy. She covered a yawn. “I’m through for the day.”

I greeted the boy, glad he wasn’t eyeing my throat, and escorted Meg out of the shop. “If the mood was full, this place would be jumping, and I’d work later,” she remarked. “But that’s not for over a week. This is a fairly typical night. Do you think you’ll like working here?”

My gaze went up the towering cliff. In the subdued evening light, the waterfall sparkled like crystals and all kinds of tropical plants and flowers bloomed in niches. Amazing to find this in the heart of a Chicago winter. “I like it fine, Meg. Soothing.” I cocked an eye at her. She was fine, too. Working over a hot espresso machine had made her brown hair curl into delicious little twists along her throat. She looked good enough to eat—in a nonvampire sort of way.

“Would . . . would you be up for a bite of supper? I still have lots of questions.” I was startled to hear the words come out of my mouth—it had been quite a while since I’d been on the dating scene.

Meg gave me a smile that warmed my bones. “I’d like that, Roy. There’s a nice little rib place near here. Quiet and great food and, if we’re lucky, maybe a jazz musician or two.”

I knew that my grin was goofy. This was my best day ever since Mary Jane O’Neill accepted my invitation to the prom when we were in high school.

A hair-raising sound between a scream and a roar blasted through the mall. I spun and looked down the east concourse, instinctively stepping in front of Meg in case something bad was coming down.

Meg wasn’t the sort who wanted protection. She moved to my side as a tiger came barreling toward the food court. Customers scattered, and I saw the mama ogre yank her little girl from the tiger’s path. An alarm began to sound, the mechanical blare adding to the air of panic.

Two people were chasing the tiger: George and Deborah. “Oh, damn! I’ll bet that’s Johnny,” she exclaimed. “His dad met the kid and kid’s mother here earlier. Said the boy was almost ready for his first Change, and that must have happened. But I thought it had to be a full moon?”

Meg whistled softly. “A new were who’s terrified might change early if he’s stressed enough.”

Johnny entered the food court, skidding to a stop on big paws as he realized what a crowd was here. A few rags of clothing hung on his furred body, left over from his Change. He was kind of small for a tiger, but still pretty damned big, with teeth and claws that could kill as quickly as vampire fangs.

Two guards closed in on him, one from each side. They were packing stun guns, but I doubt Johnny noticed anything beyond how scared he was.

With a frantic yowl, he whirled and made a flying leap onto the cliff wall. There were plenty of cracks and crevices to support his weight, and he began swarming upward. Halfway up he skidded and almost fell, swinging precariously from his front paws. There was a sharp intake of breath from the onlookers.

He recovered and kept scrabbling up until he bumped his nose on the sky patterned ceiling. Shocked, he clung there, crying piteously.

As Meg and I headed for the cliff, she said, “Weres heal really well, but a fall from that high would still be dangerous.”

From her tone, I guessed she thought it might be fatal. We reached the cliff at the same time as George and Deborah. Johnny’s mother growled at her former mate, “What the devil did you say to Johnny to freak him out like this?”

“Nothing!” George protested. “I was just telling him how great it was to be a weretiger and that I looked forward to us hunting together. How exciting it is to bring down a deer and sink your fangs in that fresh meat.”

She looked like she wanted to slug him. “You idiot! Johnny’s a vegan! He was already nervous about meeting you, and then you had to gross him out with hunting stories!”

“A vegan weretiger?” George repeated, stunned. He took a deep breath. “No matter, he’s still my boy and we have to get him down safely.” He stared at his hands, where the claws had extended from under the nails. “If I concentrate really hard, I should be able to Change and go up after him.”

This time Deborah did slug him. I made a note to ask Meg about weretiger mating customs later. Her voice a dangerous growl, she snarled, “Don’t you dare! You’d probably break your neck. Even if you made it up the cliff, you’re the last person he’d want to see.”

The security guards had joined us. One said, “The ceiling doesn’t have any access panels near him and we don’t have a ladder long enough, so we’ve called for a cherry picker. That will get him down.”

Where would they get a cherry picker at this time of night? I doubted it would arrive before Johnny lost his grip. Time to make myself useful. I stripped off my jacket, shirt, and boots. “I’ll go after him.”

Deborah swung around and gazed at me with desperate golden eyes. “Can you get up there without killing yourself? Regular humans are so fragile.”

“I was a Ranger, and climbing’s a hobby.” I flexed my fingers and toes to get them limber. I’d done my share of talking scared kids down under combat conditions, so this situation wasn’t entirely unfamiliar.

Meg kicked off her shoes and coat. “I’m coming up, too.”

“You’re a climber?” I asked, surprised.

“Yep.” She grinned, looking fit and ready. I hadn’t noticed what a fine build she had—as strong as it was shapely. “Ready to ramble, mountain boy?”

“Yep.” We started up, climbing in parallel. It wasn’t too different from a climbing gym. I kept my eye on Meg, relaxing when I saw that she was as skilled as me. She wore knit slacks and top and moved as easily as I did in my jeans and tee-shirt.

I took one quick glance down and saw that the guards had cleared the food court. Probably didn’t want witnesses if one of us went *splat*.

Once Meg slipped, and I grabbed a shrub and steadied her. Once she did the same for me. Maybe when spring came, we could go climbing together.

As we neared Johnny, Meg said quietly, “I’ll do the talking. A female voice might be more soothing.”

Smart woman. I nodded agreement. She raised her voice, “It’s okay, Johnny. No one’s going to hurt you. Just relax and we’ll help you down.” As we climbed the last few feet, she kept talking, her voice as rich and sweet as molasses.

Johnny was panting and his whole body was trembling. Even with weretiger strength, he wasn’t going to be able to hold on much longer.

Keeping my voice light, I said, “I’m going to put my hand on your back for support, Johnny. Then we’ll figure out how to get back to ground zero.” I wondered how we’d do that. I’d rescued a few cats

in trees, but I wasn't sure how good werefelines were at backing down. Hopefully better than the domestic cat cousins.

I reached out with my right hand and gently laid it on his upper back. He shuddered. Instinctively began petting as if he were a cat, saying, "It's okay, Johnny. Everything is going to be all right."

Suddenly heat and light shimmered around his form. I almost fell off the cliff, but I managed to keep my grip. Under my hand, the sleek striped fur transformed into bare, shivering skin.

Johnny cried out, and I thought we'd lose him, but Meg anchored herself on a small tree that grew from the cliff and wrapped an arm around his waist. "Don't worry," she crooned. "We won't let you fall."

He sobbed, "M—my father will hate me because I'm not like him. I can't run down helpless deer and rip their throats out, I can't!"

"You won't have to," I said. "Your dad doesn't hate you. He just wants you safe. And he wants to learn how to be a good father."

Johnny turned toward me, tears in his eyes but expression hopeful. "Really?"

"Really. He told me so. Now let's get down from here. It should be easier now with you in human form. Think you can find handholds if Meg and I steady you?"

He nodded, expression determined. A good kid. As we started to work our way down, applause broke out from below. Apparently the customers hadn't gone far.

If I ever had a more stressful descent, I can't remember when it was, except maybe that blizzard on Mt. Hood. But we made it to level ground safely.

Deborah leaped on her son with a hug that knocked him back into the wall, not that he minded as he hugged her back. George had found a blanket somewhere, and he wrapped it around Johnny awkwardly patting the boy's shoulder. As the crowd drifted away, he said, "Come on, son. I'll buy you a tofu burger, and we can talk."

Deborah gave George a shining smile. If he was hoping for a reconciliation with her, he might just get lucky. Turning from her son, she shook our hands. "God bless you both! You're the best."

Thinking of old Westerns, I said, "Just part of the job, ma'am."

Catching the reference, she laughed and gave me a hug. After hugging Meg, she left with George and Johnny. The guards and onlookers were gone, so Meg and I were on our own. As I pulled on my boots, I said, "I definitely could use a plate of ribs and a beer now. Are you still in the mood?"

She nodded vigorously. "You're on. I could put away a double rack myself."

As I buttoned my shirt, I said, "You sure know how to act in an emergency. Are you ex-military too?"

She grinned and pulled down the neck of her knit top to expose the eagle, globe, and anchor of the Marine Corps on her shoulder. "Semper fi, Roy."

"Well, I'll be damned!" I stared at her, thinking she was as sexy as Monica the vampire, and in a way that didn't make me want to run like hell.

"Very likely." Her smile turned impish. "Ready for those ribs?"

"Rangers lead the way!" I offered her my arm and we left the mall together. I was wearing that goofy smile again. I was going to like this job just *fine*.

THE FACE IS FAMILIAR

Esther M. Friesner

Multiple Nebula Award winner Esther M. Friesner is the author of over thirty novels and over one hundred fifty short stories as well as being the editor of eight anthologies, including the popular Chicks In Chainmail series. Her latest titles include Temping Fate and Nobody's Princess, whose sequel, Nobody's Prize, will appear in 2008. Educated at Vassar College, she went on to receive her M.A. and Ph.D. from Yale University, where she taught Spanish for a number of years. She lives in Connecticut with her husband and two all-grown-up children. She's a harbinger of cats and maintains a fluctuating population of hamsters. And boy, does she know where to shop!

"I always knew it would come down to this," Vivian told the ceiling. "Me, spending the best years of my life with nothing to do except talk to a hamster." She shook her head sadly, then rested it on the pet shop counter, pillowing her pale brow on folded arms. The counter was an all-glass model, with an array of doggie and kitty toys displayed haphazardly within. It ran the whole width of the store, rather like a barricade, with a gap at the left hand end to allow passage from one side to the other without the need to vault the counter itself.

The gleaming surface smelled faintly of cleaning spray, though the antiseptic scent lacked the power to eradicate the strong, persistent, underlying pong of incarcerated animals. It only took a few seconds of deep, applied self-pity before Vivian's nostrils could endure no more. She sat up straight and glared at the small, black-barred cage at her elbow.

"It's bad enough that you're a hamster, you know," she told the fluffy brown-and-white occupant. "But couldn't you at least *try* to be a good conversationalist? God knows, every other flea magnet in this dump blabs away at the least provocation. You just sit there like a hairy potato. A *cute* hairy potato, but still—! I thought that the whole point of a familiar was to provide his master with companionship!"

"Shows what you know, mortal," came a deep, melodious voice from one of the many display cages lining the back wall of Pet 2B Popular, one of Enchantment Place's premier providers of sorcerous familiars. The speaker, a black cat who rejoiced in the store-bestowed inventory name of Jupiter, stretched out with the regal grace of a panther and regarded Vivian with disdainful green eyes. "We familiars are more than mere companions. Bah! A visit to the nearest animal shelter could provide a wizard with something so commonplace as a . . . buddy. Nor is banal conversation our chief function. Any witch worth her salt can cast a spell of human speech on whatever she fancies, dog or dressing table, cat or couch, aardvark or armoire, chicken or—"

"I get the idea," Vivian said. "I'm not stupid."

"Of course not," Jupiter drawled. One whiskery eyebrow flicked ever so slightly.

Vivian looked long and hard at the black tomcat. She was indeed what Jupiter had called her—mortal, and an unmagical one at that. Her knowledge of familiars, their ways and powers, was limited to basic maintenance and sale price. She doubted that the creatures destined to share the lives of witches, wizards, warlocks, and assorted enchanters possessed telepathy, in addition to their well-documented facility with human speech. And yet there were times she felt as though they *might* command in the power to project their thoughts into the minds of others. How else to account for the

sneaking sensation that behind Jupiter's sweetly spoken reassurance lurked an unvoiced: *Darlin' you're half as smart as a box of week-old sauerkraut—and that's a generous estimation on my part—but as long as you're the one in charge of feeding me and keeping this pesthole of a cage reasonable clean, I'll call you Einstein. You dork. Oops, did I say that? Prove it, I dare you. Oh, and while you're at it? Bite meeeeeeeow!*

The pet store clerk sighed. "Nice of you to say so," she told Jupiter. Her voice was flat as a deflated parade balloon. It didn't matter whether or not the cat's low opinion of her was true or a mere figment of her bored-to-tears mind. Thanks to a fairly nasty past, Vivian had so little self-esteem that she'd take that imaginary box-of-sauerkraut comment as a compliment.

Jupiter twitched his velvety ears forward. "By the seven La Leche Leagues of Lemuria, woman, what ails you? It's no fun lobbing sarcasm grenades at someone wearing a BLAST ME sign."

"Sorry I can't entertain you as you deserve."

"You're not sorry at all. I can tell. You smell insincere."

Vivian shrugged. "Have it your way."

The cat got up and began to pace along the bars of his cage uttering low, rumbling growls of dissatisfaction. "I *will* have it my way," he declared. "It's my birthright. Am I not a cat? How *dare* you dream you've got the authority to bestow or deny the fulfillment of my smallest whim!"

"Oh, shut up, you overweight dust bunny," Vivian said. She put her head back down on the counter and muttered, "I gave up daring to dream *anything* a long, long time ago. If I didn't need the money so much, I'd quit this job *yesterday*."

"You don't like serving me?" Jupiter tilted his head, bemused by the alien concept. "I can't understand why not. I haven't been unduly demanding. You, in turn, have not been unduly competent, but no matter. I learned to lower my expectations when dealing with mortals way back when I was still a kitten."

Vivian lifted her head and rested her chin on one fist. "What *is* it like being the center of the universe, Your Majesty? You must tell me. I already know exactly what it's like being the cosmic barf bucket, so you can skip that."

"Is your life so dreadful?" the cat asked. Then he yawned so hugely that Vivian could have counted every pink rib on the roof of his mouth had she been so inclined.

"I ran away from home, didn't I? In way too much of a hurry to finish high school, let alone get through college."

"Not a good choice," the cat said.

"Hey, after Mom died, my 'choice' was leave or stay home and go along with what my stepfather wanted me to do with—with—" She stopped, wincing at the ugly memory. "Never mind. I'll spare you the details. You've probably heard them all by now." She patted the small cage where the hamster sat contentedly munching sunflower seeds. "Overheard them, that is. At least Spooky's a good listener, even if he's a lousy conversationalist."

"Spooky?" Jupiter cocked his head to the other side, peering at the hamster in its cage. "Mistress Ardath listed him as 'Hammie' for inventory control. I know. I was there when she did it. She talks to herself when she's using the computer."

"Mistress Ardath can list him as anything she likes," Vivian said. "It's her store and she *is* the

boss of me. But until he's sold, what's the harm in my giving him a name I like? And one that's little more imaginative than 'Hammie,' God knows. I'm the one who takes care of him, after all.'

"You really are . . . less than well educated as to the ways of familiars, aren't you?" the black cat observed.

"How much education do I need to shovel out a litter box?" Vivian countered.

"More than you have, since you did a slipshod job on mine last time." Jupiter puffed out his fur. "Silly mortal, how could you have worked here any appreciable length of time without learning even *one* of the basics? And the most basic of said basics at that! The Rule of Names states clearly that to name a creature is to limit, to claim, to forge a bond with the one thus identified. To know a creature's name is a magical force of great power. Why do you think witches' kids always lose their underwear at summer camp? Because their parents dare not risk losing the child himself should one of the enemies spy a *These skivvies belong to Merlin Ambrosius* name tag on laundry day!"

"Now wait just a minute," Vivian said. "Are you telling me that because I named this hamster, he's mine?"

"In essence, yes. In practice, not quite. Merely calling him by a different name than his inventor's monicker is not enough, else I'd be bonded to the first sticky-faced human whelp who toddled in here and called me 'Kitty.' " Here the tomcat shuddered in disgust. "But bestow a name upon a familiar with whom you have established a *true* relationship, however small, and the deal is done."

Vivian blinked in disbelief. "So all the time I've spent talking to—*at*—this hamster did it?"

Jupiter nodded solemnly. "Well, you have been pouring out your heart to him for quite some time."

"Wonderful." Vivian's voice was flat. "I don't even know if my lease allows pets, and now I own a freakin' hamster."

"*Almost* own him. He is yours spiritually but not yet legally. He remains the property of this store until Mistress Ardath receives payment to sanctify his transfer."

"I've got to *buy* him?" Vivian eyed the hamster uneasily. The hamster continued to munch on sunflower seeds, blissfully unperturbed by world politics, global warming, economic downturns, or the discussion currently in play over his fuzzy head. "Damn it, where's the store inventory? How much does he cost? Is she going to dock my pay over this? I can't afford that now! I can't afford that *ever*."

"Calm yourself." Jupiter licked on paw nonchalantly.

"Mistress Ardath never coerces sales. That would place her in violation of the Enchantment Place Chamber of Commerce rules. The customer's free will must be respected."

"That's a relief."

"However, there are no rules to prevent her from making your continued employment here as unpleasant as possible until such time as you bend to her will." A vole-eating grin curved the black cat's whiskers.

Vivian scowled. "If someone I could mention doesn't stop gloating, he's going to find a big dollop of dog food in his bowl tomorrow."

"Oh, boo-hoo, I'm so scared. Dog food, cat food, turtle snacks, lemur crunchies, it matters not. My life thus far in durance vile hasn't been a culinary pleasure cruise." Jupiter stuck his tongue out.

Vivian, then became distracted and began licking himself. When he was spruced up to his satisfaction he added: “~~Still, I suppose I shouldn’t let you get away with insubordination. It’s the principle of the thing.~~ Very well, then: Mess with my food, and I tell Mistress Ardath that you’ve rendered our seed-stuffed friend unfit for sale.”

“I’m going to let you in on a little secret, cat: you’re not in a good bargaining position if you don’t hold all the cards.” Vivian went to the other side of the counter, where she began rearranging one of the store’s floor displays of glossy black-and-silver feeding bowls. “It’s not like we’re alone here. She made a dramatic, sweeping gesture that took in the rows of cages lining Pet 2B Popular’s back wall. Pair after pair of luminous, overly intelligent eyes leered out at the mortal girl from a dozen different breeds of familiar. “They all heard about Spooky, too, and most of them can talk. I’ve heard them. And the ones I think *can’t* talk are probably playing possum about it. Especially that possum in the second row.” She jabbed a finger at the specified marsupial, who gave her a dirty look before showing her his hindquarters. “Any one of them could narc me out in a heartbeat, so you can stop acting like you’ve got my fate in the palm of your—er, in the pad on your paw.”

The big black cat merely began to purr. It was a resonant, compelling sound, one that slowly swelled in volume and intensity until Vivian was ready to swear that it had burrowed its way into the marrow of her bones and was now trying to shake her to pieces from the inside out. She opened her mouth to protest and discovered that her voice was gone. The purr had taken over her throat and was using her mouth as a secondary amplification system. Pair by pair, the glowing eyes of the other familiars began to close. Their breathing slowed, grew measured, and gently slipped into snores. Only the hamster continued to munch his sunflower seeds as though nothing had happened.

Jupiter stopped purring and met Vivian’s astonished gaze. “I told you there was more to most familiars than companionship and small talk,” he said. “Most of us have powers of our own. When a customer confers with Mistress Ardath, it’s not to haggle privily over price. A wise witch knows that a familiar possessing just the right power of its own can be the difference between life and death for her mistress or master in a duel of sorcery. The skill I have thus so generously used on your behalf is my specialty. I am rather proud of it. It sends magical beings to sleep while it robs their minds of any *inconvenient* memories. When my colleagues awaken, they won’t recall our conversation about that little meatball.” He flicked his whiskers forward, indicating the hamster.

Vivian peered into Spooky’s cage. “Your power’s slipping, Svengali. He’s still awake.”

“My power doesn’t waste itself. If the hamster remains untouched, it must be because his memories are no threat to you,” the cat replied smoothly.

“Really? Not that your power’s imperfect?” Vivian shrugged. “Whatever. I’ve been working here for months and I still don’t get all your little witchy rules.”

“You don’t even try,” the cat countered.

“I’ve got better things to do. Okay, not *better*, but they’re things I get paid for doing. That’s all that matters to me.”

“In that case, my money-grubbing friend, you should have paid just a bit of attention to the Rule of Names. You’d have spared yourself all of the unpaid labor that’s going to go with becoming my personal servant.” Jupiter purred again, but this time it was a mundanely feline sound. “For starters you will fetch me one can of sardines per day—skinless, boneless, and packed in olive oil. I will do my best to devour every morsel as quickly as possible, since you will have to clean up all vestiges of my daily feast lest Mistress Ardath catch wind of it. And believe me, even a nonwitch has little

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