

Destined for Greatness

by Jenelle Leanne Schmidt, ...

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Kendall's heart thudded in his chest, pounding out a rhythm of determination. He was destined for greatness, he was sure of it. Though the details of his great destiny were a bit fuzzy in his thoughts, he firmly believed this audition to become the apprentice to the Royal Wizard held the key.

He groaned when he reached the square and saw the long line. Every eligible apprentice or hired hand had turned out for the event. He wished Master Grengle had been more understanding and not insisted he complete all of his chores before allowing him to leave the inn. However, the enormous crowd did not diminish his spirits, nor did the miserable weather. Misty rain clung to his skin, and his breath steamed from his mouth. Dark clouds crept over the little town square, threatening even heavier precipitation soon. Kendall drew his arms around himself and shivered. He detested the rain. But if he won the apprenticeship, it would all be worth it. He stamped his feet for warmth. Clenching his fists, he reminded himself that he would do whatever it took to win the coveted position. Surely if he did his best, it would not matter that he was twelfth in line.

The morning dragged as he awaited his turn. He passed the time contemplating the great things he would achieve once he was a wizard.

Elsie, the butcher's daughter, stood just ahead of him in line. Her curly dark hair had been tamed into rows of braids, and it wasn't until she turned to him, excitement lighting her brown eyes, that Kendall even recognized her.

"He's been staying at your inn," she gushed. "What's he like?"

The question gave Kendall pause. For the past several days, the Royal Wizard Oolumph had indeed been staying at the inn where he worked, and Kendall could honestly say that he did not like the man. He had proven to be an impatient and disagreeable guest. This was unfortunate, as it made the prospect of being his new apprentice less appealing, but Kendall could think of no better situation to put himself in destiny's way. He had always been taught that the Fates wove together a tapestry comprised of the lives of mortals. If this were true, then it was up to him to make sure his life's thread was a vibrant hue impossible to overlook. They could not miss a wizard's apprentice! Not like they could if he remained a lowly hired hand to an innkeeper.

He shrugged. "He keeps to himself, mostly," he replied, not wanting to quell Elsie's excitement by telling her what he really thought of the wizard.

Finally, after an interminable wait, it was Kendall's turn. He stepped up and gave his name with confidence. The tall, somber man and woman in their elegant, velvet robes barely looked at him as they led him inside the mayor's house, which they had requisitioned in order to hold the auditions.

Kendall endeavored to do his best with each task set before him, but some of the things asked of him were beyond ridiculous. Staring at the candle they told him to ponder seemed pointless and boring; he actually dozed off twice! The man set a large tome before him and asked Kendall to turn to a page and tell them what it meant. When he opened the book, all he saw were lines of absolute gibberish. He dutifully read the nonsense words anyway, guessing at the pronunciation to the best of his abilities. The severe-faced woman handed him a tray of various vials filled with liquids and asked him to identify their contents. Kendall smelled them carefully, swirled them about, and even tasted one before he wrote his answers on the parchment provided. Neither administrator indicated whether he had answered correctly. He knew he had done well at categorizing various herbs, and he was confident of the test of his penmanship. The final test was the most confusing one. The administrators left him in the study alone, informing him that he was to do as he liked until they returned. Kendall quickly grew bored and allowed his instincts to take over; he swept and dusted and straightened until the little chamber was so spotless that even Master Grengle would have given a smile of approval. When the administrators told him to return to the waiting area, he pondered his performance with uneasy uncertainty. It was one thing to have determination, but with such vague instructions there was no way for him to know if he had excelled the way he had intended.

It was several more hours before the announcement was made.

Kendall's spirits sank as the name rang out across the square. He didn't even note which name was called. He only knew it wasn't his. Kendall could not bear to stay any longer, even though there were planned festivities afterward. Disheartened, he shuffled back to the stables behind the inn. Nobody could possibly understand the depths of his sorrow, but a tall glass of warm milk might help. And he would be sure to find a sympathetic ear in his friend and fellow

stable boy, Bernard. However, upon arriving at the stable, Kendall could not find Bernard anywhere.

“Ah, you’re back,” Master Grengle said, seeing Kendall’s face poke around the doorway.

“Where’s Bernard?” Kendall asked glumly.

“Ah, young Bernard.” Master Grengle ran a calloused hand through his hair. “That was something else. While you were off at the auditions, Sir Andrew rode through in a great hurry. He needed a page for an important mission he is undertaking for King Sebastian. Was willing to pay good money to buy an apprentice’s time. Bernard was the only one around, and though I hated the thought of losing both of you, I couldn’t deny the boy his destiny.”

Kendall dragged a broom across the floor with a melancholy sigh, his spirits at their absolute lowest. The Wizard Oolumph and his new apprentice had departed that morning. The village had gathered to see them off with excited fanfare, but all Kendall wanted to do was find a miserable hole somewhere, curl up inside it, and remain there forever. He tried to throw himself into his tasks at the inn, but nothing helped take his mind off the missed opportunities of the day before.

Master Grengle entered the room and watched Kendall halfheartedly pushing the broom around and around the same spot on the floor. He frowned. “You’ve been moping about since yesterday, and neglecting your duties, and I have to admit it’s getting old. I know you had your heart set on that apprenticeship, but you didn’t get it, and you need to accept that.”

Kendall heaved a mournful sigh. How could he explain that the world was just far too unfair?

Master Grengle’s mouth twisted into a displeased frown. “I think you need a break, and some fresh air, lad. Here.” He reached out and grabbed the broom, then pressed a small pouch and a piece of rolled-up parchment into Kendall’s hands. “I want to serve spiced sausages with apples and cinnamon at the evening meal tonight, but I’m out of all the spices I need. Take this list into town and purchase them for me. Can I trust you to do that?”

Kendall nodded glumly and set out toward the market near the center of town. The fresh air and the walk were nice, Kendall had to admit. The clear blue sky above soothed his soul. A butterfly flitted past. A toad hopped across the path, and he watched it make its way into the cool grasses. The flowers were in full bloom. A gentle breeze tickled the back of his neck. Contentment filled his soul as he soaked in the beauty of the day.

A clinking sound drew his attention to the ground, where he had been dragging his toes as he walked. A copper piece lay on the road, abandoned by its owner. Kendall swooped down upon it, pleased with his good fortune. A pastry from the bakery would be just the thing to soothe his disappointment.

When he made it to the heart of the village, Kendall had almost forgotten his woes. He had never liked the Wizard Oolumph, anyway; his face perpetually pursed in a disagreeable scowl, as though he had always just finished biting into a sour lime. Perhaps being a wizard’s apprentice wasn’t the best place for his destiny to find him, after all. And while he envied Bernard, he wasn’t certain that

life as a page was what he really wanted, either. Pages were not much better than innkeeper's boys if he was honest with himself. And there was little chance for recognition when you were constantly in the shadow of a knight... even if the pages were the ones who kept that armor shiny and the weapons sharp. No. That was not at all what he wanted.

While crossing the village square, a woman near the well caught Kendall's eye. Wisps of long gray hair stuck out from beneath her shallow hood above stooped shoulders. She struggled to raise a bucket from the well. He watched her for a moment, curious. It was rare to see anyone in the village he did not know; everyone came to the inn now and then for food or conversation. A memory sparked in his mind.

Hadn't his mother once told him a story about her great-aunt's brother-in-law's cousin's nephew's wife? Yes, he remembered it now. She had grown up in a small village next door to a poor girl who lived with her stepmother and stepsister. It was an awful story. The stepmother mistreated the poor girl and made her do all the work while she and her daughter went to parties every day. And yet, the poor orphan never complained. (Kendall wasn't sure he believed that part.) One day, she encountered an old woman at a well and offered her a drink of water. The old woman turned out to be a fairy in disguise. She blessed the girl so that precious gems came out of her mouth whenever she spoke, and later the girl ended up marrying a prince.

Kendall didn't really want to cough up rocks every time he talked. He imagined that would be uncomfortable. But he wouldn't mind marrying a princess and living in a palace. He changed direction and made his way over to the well.

"Good morning, mother," he said with a polite smile. That story had another part to it, he remembered, and if coughing up rocks sounded distasteful, coughing up lizards and snakes sounded like absolute misery. "Can I help you with that?"

A tiny kitten poked its head out from under the cloak where it was curled up on the woman's shoulder and eyed him haughtily. Kendall smiled at it. Appeased, the kitten retreated back under the cloak.

The woman tottered about, peering up at him with a nearsighted squint. He definitely did not recognize her. "Oh!" Her creaky voice sounded startled. "Well, well, now, well..."

"Yes," Kendall said, nodding and smiling to cover his impatience. "You seem to be having troubles with this well. Would you like me to pull the bucket out for you?"

"Well, now, well, yes. That's very thoughtful of you. Nice lad." She spoke with a pronounced lisp as she let go of the rope and stepped aside.

Kendall hauled the bucket up hand over hand until it sat on the rim of the well. He looked at the woman and felt a sudden pang of concern. If she could not lift the bucket from the well, how could she carry it any distance? Of course, a fairy in disguise would be stronger than this woman looked, but she looked extremely frail. Surely if this were a test of some kind, he could not pass it with a halfhearted effort.

"Mother, can I carry this somewhere for you?"

The woman peered at him for a moment. "I'm not your mother!" she exclaimed, a note of triumph in her voice.

“N-no,” Kendall stammered. “I just meant... I was trying to...”

“Granny Mable.” The woman stuck out a shaking hand.

“Forgive me, I should have asked your name,” Kendall replied. “I’m Kendall. Can I carry this bucket for you?”

She grinned at him. Kendall tried not to wince at the sight of her blackened and missing teeth. “Such a nice lad. Yes, yes.” She gave a shaky nod. “This way.”

She hobbled off, and Kendall followed, holding the bucket at an awkward angle so as not to spill any of the water.

The old woman lived rather a long way from town, Kendall thought, as he puffed along behind her. They took the road out of the village for several miles until they reached the outskirts of the Verdana Wood. Then the woman turned onto a little trail and dove into the trees, and Kendall was forced to go after her. The bucket weighed heavily in his hand, and he was too tired to be careful any longer; water sloshed out and soaked his right pant leg and shoe. He grimaced as his toes squelched in his wet shoe, his annoyance growing with each step. He hoped this woman was actually a fairy and not a witch who had decided to take him home and eat him. Though if she was the latter, Kendall was still fairly certain he could overpower her and get away.

“The Fates had better be taking note of this,” he mumbled to himself. “They robbed me of my destiny once already, and after I stood in line all day in the rain, too.”

A clearing opened before them, and Kendall saw a tidy little cottage at the end of the path. He quickened his pace, eager to set down the heavy bucket and return home. Master Grengle would be worried if he did not return soon, and he still had to purchase the herbs for the evening meal.

The old woman opened the door and beckoned for Kendall to follow her inside. He set the bucket on the floor in the tiny kitchen. A tabby cat lay sleeping before the tiny hearth, but it pricked its ears at their arrival, meandered over to Granny Mable, and wound its way through her legs. The gray kitten leaped down from its perch on the old woman’s shoulder and scampered to its dish, where it meowed plaintively.

“Impatient things,” Granny Mable muttered.

“If you don’t need anything else, I have an errand I need to run,” Kendall said. All thoughts of her being a fairy godmother had fled from his mind. There were just as many stories about witches as there were about fairy godmothers. Though he was beginning to think that Granny Mable was just a regular old woman.

“Wait, wait,” the woman creaked. “Just a moment now. Just a moment.” She puttered about, searching a little shelf that seemed to be the only cluttered thing in the cabin.

Kendall edged toward the door when the woman spun about, her wrinkled face beaming up at him. She grabbed his hand and pressed something into it.

“A nice reward for the nice lad who helped old Granny Mable,” she lisped. “Yes, a nice reward indeed.”

“Th-thank you,” Kendall stammered. He gave a little bob, stuffed the object into his pocket, then turned and fled back the way he had come.

“Beans?” Kendall stared at the little black objects in his hand and tried to figure out when exactly he had done something to so anger the Fates. That was the only explanation he could come up with for why everything kept going wrong.

He returned to the village and purchased the herbs, but the bakery was closed by the time he finished, so he could not get anything for himself. A prickling sensation behind his nose and eyes plagued him all the way back to the inn, but he told himself that he would not burst into tears like a child over something so silly as a pastry. Or rather, the lack of a pastry.

Master Grengle greeted him at the door with a red face and berated him for how long the errand had taken. Then he shouted that Kendall had neglected to get cinnamon, which was the one essential spice he needed for tonight’s dinner. Now everything was ruined, and it was all his fault! As he hurled a few more insults about Kendall’s lack of common sense and intelligence, Kendall stammered out that cinnamon had not been on the list, but Master Grengle’s patience was stretched beyond its limits. He refused to listen to any excuses and sent Kendall up to his little attic room without supper, where he decided to be done with the whole wretched day and go to bed.

Only then, as he shimmied out of his clothes and into his nightshirt, did he remember he had not come away completely emptyhanded from the old woman’s house. He dug in his pocket for the small objects she had pressed so urgently into his hand and studied them with ever-increasing dismay.

He peered at them, holding his hand near the candle, hoping his eyes had been playing tricks on him. But they refused to be anything but beans. Five of them. Small, black things that nestled in the palm of his hand. One had a tiny tendril of something greenish poking out of one end.

“What am I supposed to do with these? Plant them?” Kendall muttered to his candle. The candle did not answer. Nothing was turning out like it was supposed to. A tear rolled down his nose, and he swiped it away with the back of his fist and roughly flung the beans away from him. They rolled across the floor and under his bed.

With a tiny, self-pitying whimper, Kendall crawled under the covers. His last thoughts as he fell asleep were of the Fates. He wished with all his heart that he could demand to know why they had chosen such a terrible pattern for his life. If he could only find them, he’d surely give them a piece of his mind!

Troubled, dark dreams plagued Kendall’s sleep. He tossed and turned feverishly throughout the night, alternating between being so warm he had to throw his covers off and so cold that his teeth chattered and he had to pull the covers back up under his chin. As dawn broke, he welcomed its light and pushed himself into a sitting position.

His nose prickled with cold in the frosty air, and he wondered if another storm had moved in during the night to cause such a drastic change in temperature. Stretching and yawning, he fumbled about for his clothes and pulled them on while staying as wrapped up in his blankets as possible. He reached his boots without having to put his bare feet on the cold floorboards, which brought a wry grin to his face. This day was already looking up from where the one before had ended. Why did he need a grand destiny, anyway? He had a master who cared for

him and even looked out for him. He still had the copper coin in his pocket from yesterday, perhaps today he might slip away to the bakery and get that promised treat. Better late than never. But first, he wanted to let Master Grengle know how much he appreciated him and was grateful for this apprenticeship, and apologize for the way he had been acting. There would be no more self-pity or staring at the horizon longing for something different. Remembering that story the day before had also served to remind Kendall of just how good he had it here. It had been silly to believe that elderly women sat in a room somewhere, spinning out his destiny. No. He would have to determine his own fate and make the best of whatever opportunities came along.

Whistling, Kendall opened the door of his room.

The whistle died on his lips.

Kendall slammed the door and hurled himself back into his bed. Squeezing his eyes shut, he pressed his face into his hands.

“This has to be a nightmare,” he mumbled. “I need to wake up, and everything will be fine.”

Pinching himself had no effect. Neither did splashing cold water on his face from the pitcher on his nightstand. At last, he sat on his bed and stared at the door. Not a nightmare, then. Curiosity pricked him, urging him to open the door again.

Reluctantly, he cracked it open and looked outside. Instead of a narrow hallway and stairs leading down to the inn, great, green vines and swirling gray mist greeted him.

“What happened?”

The beans! He dove across the floor, ducked his head under the bed-skirt, and gaped. Thick vines snaked down beneath his floorboards. This was obviously where the ones outside originated from. Kendall rubbed the heels of his hands against his eyes and sat on the floor, at a loss. He had no idea what to do next.

“Well?” A lilting voice floated across the room. “Do you plan to waste your wish by sitting on the floor all day?”

Kendall looked up. In the doorway fluttered a tiny person. Pushing himself to his feet, he crossed the room to get a better look at her.

She was no longer than his hand from wrist to fingertips. She had a short mop of curly black hair and flashing brown eyes, and she wore a shimmering blue dress. From her back sprouted two filmy wings that he couldn't get a good look at because they were beating so swiftly.

“Who are you?” It wasn't the most intelligent thing he could have said, but it was the first thing that came to mind.

“Oh...” Her voice changed from its musical lilt to a lisping creak. “Well, well, now... well...” Then she doubled over laughing, almost turning a somersault in the air.

“Granny Mable?” Kendall gasped. So she had been a fairy!

“You're brighter than you look,” the fairy said. “But you can just call me Mable.”

“Where am I? What happened? Where did these vines come from? Did they destroy the inn? How do I get back home?”

Mable held up her tiny hands. “Hmm. You ask a lot of questions! And I make it a point never to answer all the questions I'm asked... but... let's see. I shall set your mind at ease: the vines did not destroy the inn. As for what happened, I think

you can guess that. You are now in the location you most wished to be in when you planted my gift ... really, dear, planting them under your bed was not the wisest idea, though I have to admit to its efficiency. And as for how you should get back home, well, do you really want to?"

"Of course I want to!" Kendall gasped, but a traitorous thought in the back of his mind added a question mark to his protest.

"Do you?" Mable peered deep into his eyes. Then she crossed her arms and tapped a finger against her chin. "Well, if that is the desire of your heart, all you have to do is get yourself to this exact location before the last ray of sunlight slips below the horizon, and all will return to the way it was before."

Kendall breathed a sigh of relief. "So all I have to do is stay right here..."

"Ye-es... you could do that," the fairy interrupted. She flew about and pushed the door open all the way. "Or you could do a little exploring while you wait."

Now Kendall could see that the mist had cleared. Beyond the vines creeping around his doorway, he glimpsed trees. The morning sun crept above the horizon, casting everything in hues of pink and gold. He could hear birdsong coming from the treetops, and the sound of running water nearby made him aware of a dryness in his throat. Surely it could do no harm to go find the source of that water and get a drink?

Without thinking, Kendall stepped outside. He did not see the satisfied smile on the fairy's face as he left the room.

The woods were as pretty up close as they had been from afar. There were plenty of berries and nuts to eat along the way. He had no trouble finding the little stream, where he enjoyed a drink of the sweetest, coldest water he had ever tasted. He lay back in the grasses and watched the wildlife flit about in the canopy overhead. This was perhaps the most perfect place he'd ever seen. His eyelids grew heavy, and he thought this might be a lovely moment to take a nap. He did not get many days to fritter away like this. The luxury of it overwhelmed him.

"He's going to be late," a voice whispered near his ear.

"Foolish child, wasting a gift like this," an answering voice replied.

Kendall sat up, suddenly very awake. He peered into the grass, searching for the speakers. At first, he thought perhaps he had imagined the voices, until he saw two tiny little men standing beneath a nearby toadstool.

"Excuse me, but I couldn't help but overhear you speaking," Kendall said, keeping his voice low. "Were you talking about me? What gift?"

The two little men exchanged a nervous glance. Then the taller one puffed his chest out.

"Why, the chance to address the Fates! And instead you lie here napping!"

"What?" Kendall leaned closer, not sure he had heard the man correctly.

"The Fates, they live here in this wood. Few from down below get this sort of opportunity. And here you sit, letting it slip by."

Kendall resisted the urge to jump to his feet, worried he might accidentally crush one of the little men. Instead, he leaned closer, until his nose nearly touched the one who had spoken. "Where do they live? Can you show me?"

"That's easy," the little man replied. "Just follow the stream as it flows until you reach the house with a waterwheel attached. That's the home of the Fates."

Galvanized by this new information, Kendall marched through the wood with renewed purpose. Here was his chance to take his destiny into his own hands! He would never get a better opportunity than this.

It did not take him more than an hour to find the house. It was a quaint little cottage, built right next to the stream. The large wheel attached to it turned slowly, the water diving into it and moving it along before leaping back out on the other side. Kendall paused and scooped a handful of water up from the stream, washing his face and slicking his dark hair down. The Fates were said to be powerful, and while he fully planned to tell them exactly what he thought of their work, it would hardly do to rush in there looking like a pauper.

Gathering his courage, Kendall marched up to the front door. His heart pounded in his ears so that he could barely hear his own knocking.

He waited.

One minute. Two minutes. Three minutes.

Kendall's nerves calmed, and his anger rose. He glanced at the sun. It had passed its zenith and was on its way down. There was plenty of time to get back to his room, but not if the old biddies planned to keep him standing on their doorstep all day! He knocked again, much louder this time.

He could hear shuffling around inside. They were home, but they were ignoring him! Taking a deep breath, Kendall reached out and tried the doorknob. It was unlocked.

The door swung in, revealing a large room, unlike anything Kendall had ever seen before.

In the middle of the chamber sat the largest loom Kendall had ever seen. Various colors of yarn and strings and ribbons dangled and fluttered across the heddles in a haphazard mess. Various balls of yarn and long ribbons and pieces of cloth lay about on the floor, covering every square inch of the room. A few chairs, one of them overturned, also graced the chamber, and these, too, were covered in bits and pieces of trimming.

Amid this scene of audacious chaos, four kittens played. They bounced from one ball of yarn to another. They scrambled up the loom, trailing threads from their tiny claws, weaving new bits into the mess of a tapestry, dislodging others.

Kendall stood in the door, gaping. Horror snaked through him at the sight and what it signified.

"You... YOU are the Fates?" he choked out.

At his voice, the kittens paused and looked at him. One of them gave him a quick glance and immediately ignored him, licking her paw with absolute disdain. Two of the kittens batted at a shadow and then scampered over the mess of fabric, their tails disappearing underneath the heap as they dove after some imaginary prey. The fourth kitten prowled over to him, her mien exuding indifference, but she rubbed her face against his ankle and meowed.

Kendall bent down and picked her up in his arms, her striped gray fur feather-soft in his hands. She purred and nuzzled her way up under his chin.

"Grand destiny, ha!" Kendall's soul shriveled within him. "No wonder my life is such a mess. The Fates are a bunch of kittens. There isn't even anyone here to yell at."

Why would you want to yell?

Kendall held the kitten away from his face, staring at it in amazement. It regarded him with quizzical solemnity.

“Did you just...?”

I am one of the Fates, after all.

“Ah...” Kendall did not know how to respond to this revelation.

The kitten rubbed her nose against his wrist. *It is generally polite to bow when addressing a personage of great importance. Or at least ask their name.*

“Oh, I... What is your name?”

Muriel.

Kendall set the kitten down on a nearby chair and scowled, trying to gather his scattered thoughts. It wasn't quite as satisfying, yelling at a bunch of kittens, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to try. He met the kitten's direct gaze. “My life is a mess!” He indicated the loom. “Just look what you're doing! These are people's lives you're playing with and jumping all over! It's not right. You can't do this. If you're the Fates, then surely you are supposed to be taking more care than this.”

A wave of amusement from all four kittens washed over him.

Two kitten heads popped up from beneath the blanket they had dived under a moment before.

Oh, he's funny. The orange kitten yawned, showing her tiny teeth. She came out from beneath the blanket and crouched, eyeing Kendall's pant leg, her tail lashing back and forth.

Let's keep him, certainly. The little black kitten pounced on the orange kitten's tail. The orange kitten leaped into the air and twisted, and the two of them tumbled together across the floor for a moment. As abruptly as it had started, the wrestling match ended, and each kitten began delicately cleaning themselves, as if the mere idea of roughhousing offended them.

Amerelle? Muriel's voice rang with the question.

All three kittens looked at the one still licking her paw. She continued, ignoring all of them until she had finished. Then she rose. She was the biggest of the felines, though still a kitten. Her fur was pure white, with a black spot on her front paw. She stalked over to Kendall and wound herself through his legs.

I think it would serve him right. Amerelle's thoughts were stronger. They rang in Kendall's head like the gonging of a large bell.

Oh, good! Muriel pounced on Kendall's toes, her claws catching in the hem of his pant leg.

“What are you talking about? You can't keep me,” Kendall said. He knelt down and gently removed the gray-striped kitten's claws from his pant leg. “I have to go home. You're just a bunch of silly kittens.”

Rude! The chorus of kitten-voices in his head clamored.

We are not silly, Muriel retorted. She clambered up on the loom and stared at him, her bright eyes unblinking. *Cats are the noblest of creatures. This is a well-established fact.*

Kendall snorted derisively. “You're just a bunch of kittens playing with yarn.” His shoulders slumped. “I was so certain that the Fates were wise beings, caring for the destiny of mortals. I thought...”

You thought what? Amerelle's imperial voice rang with scorn. You believed your destiny to be a grand one? Why should it be? Have you slain monsters? Have you healed the sick? Have you fought on the side of justice? What have you done to make your thread shine brighter? What have you done to deserve a better place in the tapestry of life?

Caught off guard by the directness of her question, Kendall stammered out a few meaningless words.

Destined for greatness, ha! Amerelle sniffed then licked a paw.

The other kittens giggled, their laughter mocking as they tumbled about in the yarn.

An angry flush filled Kendall's head with a throbbing heat. "Well, at least I'm not a cat!" he shouted.

Four sets of gleaming eyes fixated on him with intense glares. The gray-striped kitten leaped down from the loom and stalked over to sit at his feet.

What do you think, sisters? Muriel asked.

Amerelle stretched lazily. *He is certainly insolent.* Was that admiration in her tone?

Muriel wound around his leg, her tail flicking back and forth. She paused in front of him and yawned, her mouth opening ridiculously wide. A strange sensation shuddered through Kendall's body like an itch and then disappeared. He stared at Muriel.

What was that? he thought.

She gave him a sly look, and then her head whipped to the side and she pounced on something to his right. He shook his head. He should have known better than to try to argue with cats. The sun would set soon; it was time to leave. He turned and stumbled, falling over his front paws and landing on his nose. A mew of pain escaped his mouth, and he sat back on his haunches, thoroughly confused.

Something flickered in his peripheral vision. It startled him, and he leaped sideways to get away from it. He landed on his hands and feet and got a better look at the thing that had scared him. It was only his tail.

His tail!

Kendall stared down at his paws and then contorted his neck around, trying to get a better look at himself. Pale, gold-striped fur covered his body. They had turned him into a kitten! A deluge of panic overwhelmed him. He opened his mouth to scream, but the only sound he could manage was a pitiful mewing.

What have you done to me? he all but shouted.

Given you what you wanted, of course, Muriel replied, batting at his nose with a soft paw.

I didn't want this!

You wanted to be greater than you were, no? What is greater than being a cat? Come, play with us!

You... You've... Kendall wanted to scream. He wanted to cry. This was worse than not being chosen as the wizard's apprentice. This was worse than Master Grengle shouting at him for being late. This was worse than...

Something glinted in the floorboards, and he pounced on it. He caught a glimpse of something else that wiggled tantalizingly beneath a pile of yarn, and he scampered after it, scrambling about and tangling himself in scraps of cloth.

His new form was ungainly at first, and he kept forgetting to use his front paws to catch himself as he bounded about the room, landing on his nose. Muriel and the other kittens laughed at him, but he caught on quickly as they led him about, showing him the wonders of the cottage. There was magic here beyond what his human eyes had been able to see.

Muriel sprang at him, but he evaded her and scampered up the loom, his claws finding easy footholds among the weft. When he reached the top, he lost his balance and tumbled to the ground. He twisted easily in the air and landed on his feet on the soft cushion of fabrics covering the floorboards. The other kittens frolicked around him, and they tumbled about together, playing in this glorious land of string and bits of fabric until well after the sun's last ray sank below the horizon.

At long last, the kittens wore themselves out, and Kendall noticed a gnawing hunger in his tiny belly. Before he had a chance to ask about dinner, an enormous bowl of warm milk magically appeared.

After supper, Kendall stretched out near the warm hearth, his tummy pleasantly full. He closed his eyes, basking in the drowsy warmth of the fire. This was a charmed life. He could think of nothing better than being a kitten. It truly was the only thing worth being. A smile curled at the corners of his lips; he had always known he was destined for greatness.

