

BECOMING BADER

T.K. ELDRIDGE



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"Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you." - Ruth Bader Ginsburg

CHAPTER ONE

FIVE YEARS AGO

The watcher curled gloved hands into fists and smiled. The screams had finally gone silent, letting the watcher know the people inside were dead. Then again, the flames shooting up as the roof collapsed were also a good indicator that anyone inside had no hope of survival. Firefighters poured water on what had once been a well-loved Craftsman style bungalow where a family had shared their lives.

A phone was pulled from a pocket and placed to an ear. "It is done."

"All of them?" a voice asked.

"If they were in that house, they're dead."

"And the book?"

"I searched thoroughly. That book is not in the house."

"Was the daughter home from college yet?"

"It's not my job to determine whether someone who does not live there is in the home. It is my job to simply make sure that those who do live there are home at the time of execution. You know this."

"Wonderful. So it is likely she lives."

“Not my problem. I completed my task. Make sure my funds are transferred, or you will be my next task.”

“Understood. Disappointing in the lack of completion, but as long as the parents are gone, the situation has improved. A shame you couldn’t find the book.”

“You misunderstand me. *My* task is complete. Any failure in this contract was on your end.” The watcher ended the call and tucked the phone away once more. Their car was parked several blocks away, so they turned from the spectacle and left the scene.

CHAPTER TWO

PRESENT DAY

Bader Winthrop smiled at the woman on the other side of the counter as she handed over the bag of books. “Enjoy your purchases, Mrs. Marshall. I’m so glad we finally found a copy of that book you’ve been searching for.”

“Thank you, Bader. Have a lovely rest of your day,” the woman replied and turned to leave the store.

Bader stepped around the polished wood counter and went to lock the front door, the sign flipped to ‘we’ll be back soon’. “Time for lunch, Meph,” she called out to the black cat perched in the front window among the books on display.

She pulled her curly hair up off her neck and secured it with the hair tie that lived on her wrist. Weaving her way around displays, past cozy nooks where one could sit and read, Bader reached the break room where she paused to refill the water fountain for the cats. The twist of a key opened the door on the far wall and she stepped from the shop into her home. Willoughby, her mixed-breed dog, came running to greet her.

“Hi, Wills. You need to go out?” Bader asked and took a few steps more to open the back door and let him out into the garden. Unusual to have in the city,

Bader's back yard made it possible for her to breathe most days. High brick walls surrounded a roughly ten thousand square foot space that could only be accessed through her apartment, or through the shop. The old gate to the driveway had rusted shut and been overgrown decades ago. A flagstone patio area, tucked into the L of the building, was a popular place to sit with her morning coffee when the weather allowed. Grass and more flagstone paths wound through beds of herbs, vegetables, and flowers. Three fruit trees and one ornamental cherry tree gave strategic shade throughout the yard.

Today, the weather was typical for late spring, so Bader went in to get her lunch, then came back out and propped the door open so her roommates could wander in and out as they pleased. One hand spooned salad into her mouth while the other hand tapped the screen of her tablet. She liked to check the news and current events on her lunch break, since she didn't want to be seen behind the counter of the bookshop with an e-reader or tablet in her hands. Wills parked himself next to her leg and rested his chin on her knee. Shaggy beige fur with streaks of darker brown told of some kind of terrier in his bloodline, but the shape of his head and his size had some say he must have a bit of Labrador Retriever or German Shepherd in his mix. Bader didn't much worry about what he was made up of, she just loved him as he was.

"Sorry, Willoughby, no scraps for you today. Besides, you have a bowl of food inside, go nibble on that," Bader said as she scratched behind his ears. The dog sighed and padded into the house. The two cats, Mephistopheles and Mischief - a sleek black male and a gray tabby female - were sprawled on the warm patio in the sun.

Bader turned her attention back to the tablet and froze. "Aw, hell. *Another* pandemic." She read an article that claimed a vaccine was being developed and should be ready in six months, but for now people needed to mask up and social distance.

“The last time there was one of these, I almost lost the bookstore. I’d better make sure our online shop is bug-free and ready to do the heavy lifting,” Bader said to herself. “Funny, the article doesn’t mention what the symptoms of this one are.” She spent a few moments doing searches, but even the Center for Disease Control had no list of symptoms or things to watch out for. “Now that’s weird. Even the CDC is silent. That hasn’t happened since the twenty-twenty spread that got politicized.” Her musing ended when her smartwatch alert reminded her she had to reopen the store. “Okay, kids. I’ll leave the door open because it’s supposed to stay nice today. Don’t bring any critters into the house, please?”

Bader cleaned up her bowl from lunch and headed back into the store, the door to her home locked once more behind her. She slid the tablet under the counter and went to unlock the front door and flip the sign back to ‘open’. Professor Eagan showed up about five minutes after Bader got herself a cup of coffee and opened a browser window on the shop computer.

“Hello, Professor. What can I help you with today?”

The professor was in his mid-forties with silver temple streaks in his short dark hair and blue eyes that always seemed to be looking at something not quite close enough to see clearly. His appearance was usually neat and orderly, but today he looked anything but. Shirt untucked from his slacks and buttoned crookedly, and two different shoes on his feet.

“Professor, are you okay?” Bader asked.

“They’re coming for me,” he said, his voice a hoarse whisper. “I spoke to one of them and now they’re hunting me.”

“Who’s hunting you?”

“The faeries. I looked up from my notes and there were two of them seated in my classroom. I had only seen them in their human form, not their fae form, and

they were so beautiful, I couldn't stop staring. Now they know *I* know and they have to silence me."

Bader pulled out her phone and dialed 911. "I have a customer in my store that seems to be having a nervous breakdown. Winthrop Literary Society on South Main. I'll try and calm him down, but hurry, please."

"Professor, would you like to come sit in the nook where no one can see you, and have some tea? I can make sure you're safe," Bader said.

His head bobbed frantically and he hurried to the little reading corner tucked between two shelves of books. Bader got him to settle in one of the wing chairs, then sat in the other chair near him.

"What kind of tea do you like?" she asked, stalling for time as she heard sirens coming closer. "Would chamomile be nice?"

The sirens cut off and then Bader heard the chime on the door. "Stay here, I'll go see who it is."

The professor grabbed Bader's hand and whispered, "Please, don't let the faeries kill me."

A shiver ran through her and her hand tingled. Bader patted his hand with her other one and slipped away. She saw the medics and waved them over. "He came in, ranting nonsense about fairies hunting him. He's Professor Darien Eagan. He teaches over at the university."

One medic went to talk to the professor while the other looked at Bader. "Did you touch him?"

"Well, yes. He's a friend who's acting very strangely."

"Once we leave, close your store. Go take a shower and try to touch as few things as possible. Put your clothes in the laundry and wash in hot water. Spray disinfectant on your shoes. Then disinfect your store and wait twenty-four hours before opening again."

“What are you talking about? Is he showing signs of that new pandemic I read about?” Bader asked.

“Yeah, he is,” the medic said. “Call 911 if you start feeling not quite yourself. There is a quarantine ward at the hospital. It’s not full. Yet.”

The other medic led the professor out to the ambulance. “I sedated him. Let’s go.”

“Remember, if you start feeling odd, call 911,” the medic said and followed her partner outside. Bader went to the door and locked it once more, then flipped the sign to ‘closed’. She paid attention to everything she touched so she knew what to focus on later for cleaning, but she was soon under a hot shower, scrubbing herself in a panic.

“I can’t get sick, I can’t. What the hell is this new virus? It makes you go crazy?” Bader whispered to herself as she used a brush on her nails and hands, the soap stinging where she scrubbed too hard. “Please, don’t let me get sick.”

She dried herself off, pulled on clean clothes and put the washer on hot. She found rubber gloves and the heavy-duty disinfectant solution, and went through her house and the shop, scrubbing everything down. Bader even mopped the floor and wiped down the windows. Shades drawn, she left the lamp on the desk turned on and took her tablet back to the apartment. Willoughby followed her around the place as she closed the blinds and turned on lights. She didn’t want to be alone in the dark tonight. “Okay, Wills, let’s get our nightly business done, shall we? Mama’s gonna curl up with a pot of tea and her new book.”

The dog went outside and a few minutes later, came back in with the two cats following him. “Good boy, you got everyone in for the night. Thank you.” The patio door was shut and locked, and Bader did her best to focus on the novel she’d been eagerly awaiting – but her mind was on the events of the day and the sheer lack of information. Every other pandemic since the catastrophic handling of the twenty-twenty outbreak, had been categorized by volumes of information,

what steps to take, what to watch out for, and when the vaccines would be available. This one? She couldn't even find a name for it.

Tired and frustrated, Bader turned off most of the lights and went to bed. It took her a long time to finally fall asleep.

The next morning, Bader called the hospital to check on Professor Eagan. She was told he was resting comfortably, but as she was not family, they could not give out any specific information. Coffee and some breakfast made her feel a little more alert, so Bader decided that since she had a whole day of being closed, she might as well get some ordering done and polish the website. Those things she could do from her laptop on the patio, so she set herself up with a carafe of coffee, a plate of fruit, and the door to the house propped open so the furry residents could go in and out as they pleased.

A couple of hours later and the website was updated and ready to accept online orders. She would then feed them into a spreadsheet that allowed her to check if she already had the books or if they needed to be ordered, how to get them shipped out and a notification system for tracking. “Well, that wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be. At least if things get locked down, we’ll have a way to keep the lights on.”

Bader yawned and gave herself a shake. “I guess I didn’t sleep well last night. Maybe a nap is in order. I don’t need to get run down and be vulnerable.” She brought everything in and called to Willoughby, then shut and locked the door. “I

know, my loves. It's not warm enough for the hammock yet, but soon we'll nap in the yard and enjoy our little oasis."

She left her shoes by the door, slipped off her jeans, and climbed into bed. Willoughby jumped up beside her and soon Meph and Mischief were up there, too. Like a pack, they found comfort in each other and Bader always felt safe when they were all tucked around her body.

Sleep came quickly, and so did the dreams. It had been years since Bader had had the dreams of heat and flames. Fire trapped her in her room, licked at her feet as she tried to break a window to get out, but nothing seemed to work. This time, though, she could hear screams urging her to hurry – screams that sounded like her pets if they had a language she could understand. It finally faded and she curled around Willoughby who rumbled a low *"You're safe. We're here."*

It was late afternoon by the time Bader woke. A headache and a general groggy feeling had her pulling a bottle of electrolyte drink out of the fridge and downing it. Food of any kind was unappealing, but she knew if she was fighting something, her body needed the fuel, so she heated up a can of chicken soup and ate it in front of the TV. News services all talked about the new pandemic and urged masking up and social distancing, but there were still no lists of symptoms or statements of what happened when one discovered they were ill.

Her channel flipping was interrupted by her phone. A call from her friend Nora had her muting the TV as she answered. "Hey, Nora."

"Bader, are you okay? I came by earlier and the shop was closed and you didn't answer your phone."

"Sorry, Nora. I had someone that was possibly infected in my shop yesterday. I had to close down for twenty-four hours and disinfect. I didn't sleep well last night, so I took a nap."

"Ah, well, what are you doing right now?"

Nora was a really sweet friend, but Bader sometimes found her rather intrusive and pushy. Like now. “I’m eating some soup and watching TV. Then I’m going to let Wills out and curl up in bed with a book.”

“You don’t want to come out tonight? There’s a new club that opened over on High Street.”

“You do realize they’re advising masking up and social distancing, right?”

“Yeah, but they’re not telling us anything else. Maybe this is just a test to see how gullible we’ve all become.”

“I don’t think so, Nora. Professor Eagan was ranting and really not himself. This isn’t a joke.”

“Whatever. Be a Debby-Do-Gooder if you want. I’m going to go have fun. I’ll let you know what you missed tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Nora.” Bader let her annoyance come out in her tone, then disconnected the call. “You’d think people would have a freakin’ clue by now,” she muttered. “Like we haven’t had enough examples already.”

Nora’s attitude and critique got under Bader’s skin. Just shy of twenty-six years old, Bader had no real interest in finding a partner or having kids. Oh, she’d dated, but it always ended up with Bader growing tired of always being the responsible one.

She’d seen the last three pandemics decimate the population every time. How someone who had managed to survive this long could be so cavalier about it all, made no sense to Bader. Restless, she went into the storage room and pulled out the basket of individually wrapped mask and glove packets. This would sit on a table by the outer door. Everyone would have to wear a mask and gloves before they entered the shop, or she wouldn’t buzz them in. She’d have to make sure the door was set to only open if she pressed the button. So many little details to remember, but they all came back pretty clearly. It had only been five years since the last pandemic – just six months after she’d taken over running the store. This

fall, it would be six years since her parents died in the house fire. Some days it seemed like it had just happened, other days as if it had been a lifetime ago. Grief was like that, Bader supposed. She'd lost friends and other family members to accidents or disease. Loss was a part of life. But losing the people that brought you into the world? That loss changed something in the very essence of a person.

One of the advantages of living alone meant no one could see how you slept. Bader took her worn teddy bear from the shelf in her bedroom and brought it into bed with her. It had traveled to college with her and was one of the few things she still held onto. For tonight? She wanted the comfort of her childhood.

The next morning, Bader woke early enough to do a set of exercises in front of the workout mirror, shower, cook herself a decent breakfast, and let the animals out into the garden while she ate. "It's supposed to be nice today, so I'll leave the door propped open and put the screen curtain up to keep the bugs out, but you guys can still go in and out. Be good and don't bring any dead birds or mice inside, okay?"

Willoughby flopped onto his back on the warm patio stones while Meph watched from on top of the patio table and Mischief sprawled next to Will.

"Enjoy, my loves," Bader said and headed inside. The basket was put on a table by the door with the sign that said 'Mask and gloves before you enter.' She was prepared to have a few arguments about it, but the government had been good about backing businesses who enforced protection rules.

The Winthrop Literary Society had been her parents' dream. They'd bought the old store instead of having a lavish wedding. A civil service at the courthouse and a dinner with family and friends – and they spent their wedding night in the tiny apartment in the back. They'd met in college, he'd been getting a degree in library sciences, and she had been getting a degree in literature and folklore. Both had a love of old books, unusual finds, and good stories – and that

translated into a life that allowed them to surround themselves with books and people of like minds. Every Friday night, they had a gathering at the shop where authors and readers could come and drink wine or coffee and share their love of all things words.

Bader remembered sitting under the table, leaned against her mother's legs as she listened to the voices discussing Shakespeare and Joyce, Breene, Mayer, and Swain. Good natured arguments over whether Quinn, Manney, or Cooper handled the future worlds better, alongside readings of Robert Frost or Amanda Gorman to see which captured emotions more accurately.

The seeds of her desire to become a lawyer had been planted during those Friday evening debates, and Bader wanted nothing more than to rekindle that kind of community. This new virus wouldn't slow down her plans. She'd simply push forward and get that awning put up over the patio and move the gatherings outside. A fire pit for warmth and to chase away the spring chill, the awning to protect against sudden showers, and they could still have a small gathering of committed literary types. Bader ordered a few extra copies of her favorites, to give the new society members some options.

Customers started to trickle in and no one balked at the mask and gloves rule. Bader herself wore a mask and gloves as she handled the books and packaging. The UV light system flared around the door frame every time the door opened, giving a quick sanitizing wash each time someone entered or exited.

When he entered, Bader looked up and her breath caught. *He's beautiful*, she thought to herself, then blushed – grateful for the mask that hid her face. His hair was cut close to his scalp and thin lines were shaved at the temples in ornamentation. His skin was darker than hers and eyes of a hazel brown with hints of gold that sparkled with amusement when he had to speak a second time to capture her attention. “Excuse me,” he said, his voice a rich baritone. “Do you have a copy of Laura Thalassa's Four Horsemen series?”

Bader shook herself and laughed. “Sorry, you caught me daydreaming. Let me check,” she said as she tapped the screen to check the shop’s inventory. “We have all four, yes. They should be on that third shelf down, near the middle, at the far end.”

He turned to follow her directions and Bader had a chance to admire a physique that could have belonged to a Greek god, or an Olympian. Good thing masks hid drool or Bader would be giving her other customers an amusing tale to tell later.

“I’d want to lick that all over, too,” Maggie Carmichael said as she watched the man walk away. “But I’ve got my Barry, and that’s good enough for me.” She set her stack of books on the counter and waved her chip at the screen to pay.

“I mean, I didn’t, I wasn’t...oh, never mind me,” Bader stuttered as she bagged up the order.

“Nothing wrong with admiring beauty, Bader. It’s healthy to admit that some things are just worth staring at,” Maggie said with a chuckle.

Bader rolled her eyes and shook her head. “I’m not even looking for anyone.”

“That’s how I met my Barry. I wasn’t looking, had no interest – I was focused on my life and career. Then he showed up and I couldn’t look away.”

“Speaking of showing up, are you coming to the Literary Society meeting on Friday? I’m going to set up on the patio so we can social distance and still gather. I’ve got an awning being delivered to shelter us, and I’m going to go grab a fire pit container to keep us warm if it gets chill.”

“I’ll do my best,” Maggie said. “Do you have flyers made up for it yet?”

“They’re supposed to be delivered this afternoon,” Bader said.

“I’ll swing by on the way home from work. I can put some up around the pedestrian mall tomorrow.”

“I appreciate it, Maggie. Stay safe out there,” Bader said as Maggie picked up her bag of books and headed out.

“What’s this about a Literary Society?” the man said as he stacked the four books on the counter.

“Friday evenings, people who enjoy reading, writing, or just being around books can gather and chat over wine and coffee for a couple of hours. It’s something my parents used to do and I’ve been trying to pick up the tradition once more,” Bader said. She put in his order and he waved the chip at the screen. It chimed and Bader smiled. “Magnus Brewster. Pleased to meet you. I’m Bader Winthrop.”

“What time on Friday?” Magnus asked. “And would you like me to bring anything?”

“It starts at seven, goes until about ten or eleven, depending on people’s moods. With the new pandemic starting up, bring your own cup and there will be coffee pods and wine. I’ll make small plates of finger foods for people, individually wrapped. Anything more you want, you can bring it,” Bader said.

“I’m still settling into the area, so it’d be nice to meet other book folks. I’ll do my best to be here,” Magnus said.

“What brought you to Bishop’s Bay?”

“I’ll be teaching at Bay College. Literature and Folklore. I was supposed to work with Professor Eagan, but now it looks like I’ll be taking over some of his classes. He’s the one that recommended your shop to me, and he didn’t come close to how wonderful this place is.”

“I had to call emergency services two days ago. Our professor was raving about fae hunting him and he was quite unwell. I called the hospital yesterday morning and all they could tell me was that he was resting comfortably, since I’m not family. I don’t know if he has any family in the area, do you?” Bader asked.

“I think his brother came down from Nova Scotia to take care of his affairs,” Magnus said. “I’m sorry to tell you, but the professor took his own life yesterday afternoon.”

“Oh, no,” Bader whispered. “How sad. He was such a brilliant man and a wonderful conversationalist. He said he remembered when my parents held the Literary Friday gatherings and it was his suggestion that I start them up again, that got things moving. We’ll have to have a moment in his memory on Friday.”

“I’ll be here,” Magnus said, and he slid a business card across the counter. “Here’s my contact information. Reach out to me if you need anything before Friday. Take care, Bader Winthrop.” He picked up his bag and turned for the door.

“You take care too, Magnus Brewster,” Bader said.

CHAPTER FOUR

The team had installed the awning and Bader wondered why she had waited so long to get one. It was an intricate design of cables and one pole sunk into the ground, with the sail of fabric overhead. It offered shade and shelter without blocking the whole patio or interfering with the views of the gardens. A collection of comfortable outdoor chairs with thick cushions were set an appropriate distance apart with small tables in between. A table near the wall of the building held bottles of wine and two coffee pod machines with a basket that held a variety of coffee and tea flavors. On the patio, at the outer edge of the awning, was a cast iron fire pit that Bader felt had been a bit of an extravagance, but she could not resist the detailing that made it look like a dragon blowing flames when it was lit. Strands of solar lights gave the patio and garden a celebratory air.

Willoughby and the cats were in the apartment, but Bader had opened the windows and the inside door so they could sniff through the screens and be content that their fourth pack member was safe. The lights in the shop were low – a few lamps here and there and the entryway were lit, but the main overhead lights were off. It gave the space a warm, welcoming, and somewhat mysterious

feel. The access to the patio from the shop was usually locked and hidden with a curtain and a little seating arrangement. Tonight, the curtain was pulled back, the doors propped open, and the seating arrangement moved to the side. Bader checked her watch and saw it was near seven, so she went to unlock the front doors and prepared to greet her guests.

First in the door was Maggie Carmichael with her wine tumbler firmly in hand and a plate of cupcakes to add to the table of food. Individually wrapped was something people had adjusted to doing, and Maggie made them festive with ribbons holding each bag closed.

“Those look great, Maggie, thank you,” Bader said. “Go straight back and you’ll see the open door.”

“I’m so excited,” Maggie replied. “I also saw a few people parking as I came up the walkway. Looks like you’ll have a good crowd tonight.” Maggie headed on through the shop and Bader heard a little exclamation of delight when she found the back patio.

Next at the door was Magnus, masked – as Maggie and Bader were – and carrying a travel mug and a bouquet of flowers.

“For the hostess,” Magnus said as he handed her the mixed bouquet. “I haven’t found my baking pans yet, or I would’ve tried to bring food, too.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Bader said with a laugh. “I’m just glad you came. Head on through to the open door in the back – and thank you for the flowers. I’ll take care of them in a bit.”

More people arrived, both regular customers and a couple of people new to the shop who had seen the flyers. One older man arrived without a mask and Bader asked him to grab one out of the basket before he came in.

“No, I don’t think so,” he said.

“I’m sorry, you can’t join us unless you wear a mask,” Bader replied.

“This is a public building, I can do what I want,” he replied.

“Actually, this is a private business that is open to the public at certain times, and as its owner, I can set whatever reasonable protocols I wish to protect myself and my other customers. If you’re not willing to wear a mask to protect us, then you’ll have to leave.”

“I’ll be sure to let my friends know how you’ve treated me tonight,” the man said and stomped back down the walkway.

Bader watched him get into an expensive black sedan, then locked the door and headed towards the voices and laughter in back. She stopped in the break room to put the bouquet in a vase of water, then carried it out and set it on the food table.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming tonight. If there are stragglers, they’ll ring the bell and I’ll go see to them – but for now, I think this is a good group to start,” Bader said. People settled into seats around the patio and grew quiet. “The way these usually went, when I was a child, was an open discourse of various literary topics well lubricated with wine and coffee or tea. People would flow in and out as the evening went on – and I’d like to try and keep to that kind of free-flowing exchange of ideas and spaces while still staying aware of pandemic protocols. A couple of people also had interest in adding a book club aspect to the group, and you’re welcome to browse the stacks and see if you can decide on a book for the first month’s reading. I picked up a few favorites – they’re on the table inside the door, but if those don’t work, you’re free to pick something else. So, for tonight, let’s get to know each other and enjoy this rejuvenation of the Winthrop Literary Society’s Friday frolics.”

A smattering of applause and Bader opened a bag near the table to pull out her own wine tumbler to fill.

A cupcake appeared at the edge of her vision and she turned to see Magnus with a chocolate frosted strawberry cupcake in its bag being held out to her. “Maggie said these were your favorite, so I saved you one.”

“My hero,” Bader said with a laugh as she took the offering. “Wine and sugar. A step above caffeine and sugar, but still both things that make this lady happy.”

“And I’m already learning how to please you,” Magnus said, his eyes sparkling over the edge of his mask. “May we sit near the fire and get to learn more about each other?”

“I’d like that, but I also have to make sure the overall conversation keeps flowing,” Bader replied. “I’ve also got a book I’m hoping people agree to use for the book club.”

“Which one is that?” Magnus asked.

“Tim Tigner’s *Leonardo and Gabriel*,” Bader replied.

“To get at the truth, you often need to move beyond the apparent answer,” Magnus quoted from the book and Bader sighed.

“Gorgeous *and* smart. I’m in trouble.”

“Ha, I’m not all that,” Magnus replied and Bader blushed.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” she retorted, then turned to the gathering at large. “I vote that we read Tigner’s *Leonardo and Gabriel* for the first book club choice. It’s not overly long and has a lot of content for discussion. What do you say?”

“I like it. I also think a study of the Paranormal Women’s Fiction genre that started around 2019-2020 would be good, too,” Maggie said. “There are several authors that wrote in that genre from the very beginning and we could look at the similarities that built the foundations of the genre.”

“That’s a good one, too, Maggie – but maybe a little enthusiastic for the start? We’d all be reading different books. Maybe save that for a month or two down the road?” Bader said.

“Sure, and I like Tigner’s books, too. The one you’re recommending is different than his other work and much more thought-provoking,” Maggie replied.

“And here I thought you’d prefer Hoffman’s *Green Angel*,” a gentleman said from a chair near the shop door.

“I don’t know that one,” Bader replied. “Could you share your name and perhaps a bit about the book?”

“You can call me Mr. Sudya. The story is about a girl named Green whose family dies in a catastrophic fire.”

Bader’s smile tightened, but she remained silent.

“I’ve heard of that one. It’s a young adult novel and the catastrophic fire is considered to be the events of the 9/11 terrorist attacks,” Magnus said. “It’s about a child adjusting to the world after loss. Not sure that’s something we need to address in the book club, since we’ve all had to deal with loss from the various pandemics.”

“I’m going to have to agree with Magnus on this one,” Bader finally said. A glance at Magnus and she murmured a soft, “If you’ll excuse me a moment,” and went into her apartment.

Maggie got more wine and then moved to sit near Magnus. “I don’t know who that man is, but that was cruel on his part.”

“Why would it be cruel?” Magnus asked.

“Bader’s parents were killed in a house fire about five years back. She’d just finished college and instead of going on to law school, she came home and moved in here and took up the family business.”

Magnus’ gaze turned back to Mr. Sudya and he set his cup down. “I’ll take care of this,” he said to Maggie.

Magnus approached Mr. Sudya. “I think it’s time for you to go.”

“And why would I want to leave now Dr. Brewster? The evening is just getting started,” Sudya said.

“Because you’ve just made yourself unwelcome. Cruelty is not an acceptable form of discourse.”

“Ah, the knight in shining armor tactic. Good choice. Ms. Winthrop does appear to enjoy fantasy tales. Perhaps that will work in your favor?”

Magnus looked at the man seated in front of him, then pulled out his phone and snapped a photo before sending a text. “Now your image and what info I have on you has been sent to a police officer acquaintance of mine. If you continue to remain and harass the present company, I will ask him to please come remove you from the premises.”

The fury that rose in Mr. Sudya turned his pale skin to a ruddy hue and his dark eyes became even darker. He pushed to his feet and got within an arm’s length of Magnus. “You will regret this moment, Dr. Brewster. Remember this,” he hissed as he turned and stormed through the shop door, letting it fall back with a loud bang that made everyone turn and look.

“Guess he didn’t like being told he was rude,” Magnus said to the gathering with a shrug. He then turned back and went into the shop to follow Sudya and make sure he left the store. Magnus got to the door about the same time Bader did.

“I just saw that Sudya guy storm out of here. He left both doors wide open,” Bader said. “What happened?”

“I told him he was rude. He threatened me. I suggested he leave or I’d call the police. He left. Angrily.”

“Well, sucks to be called out for being an asshole, doesn’t it?” Bader said and locked the doors once more. “Thanks for dealing with him. I had to go calm myself down before I made a scene myself.”

“Maggie let me know why his words were an issue. I’m glad I could step up for you.”

“Thank you again. Shall we go back to the gathering?” Bader said.

“Are you ready to go back?” Magnus asked.

“Honestly? I’m still a little shook. I’m wondering why he was even here, what he thought he’d achieve by being that rude, and what his name really is, because ‘sudya’ is Russian for ‘justicar’ and if anyone has a right to justice, it would be me – justice for my parents against whoever took them from me.”

“So it was arson?” Magnus asked.

“The results were inconclusive. They lean heavily towards arson, but there were no known accelerants used – just a pattern that spoke of an accelerant-style behavior of the fire in several locations around the house.”

“That’s weird, huh?”

“Yeah. And left me with a lot of unanswered questions. Okay, we can talk alone later, let’s go back to the gathering. There is wine and I’m going to have more of it.”

“After you, m’lady,” Magnus said and Bader gave him a smile that crinkled her eyes above the mask.

CHAPTER FIVE

The gathering started to break up around nine-thirty, with only Magnus and Maggie left to help Bader clean up by ten. Magus moved the furniture back in place at Bader's direction and then made sure the fire pit was extinguished. Maggie helped clean up the trash and Bader handled the food and drinks that remained. Maggie headed out and Magnus made sure Bader had locked everything up before he gave her a wave and headed up the walkway.

Bader's dreams that night were full of strange men keeping her from going where she wanted to go, and then about Magnus holding her hand and trying to tell her something so very important. She woke the next morning feeling disconcerted and foggy, and even a shower didn't seem to help.

"This is going to be a two pots of coffee day," Bader muttered to Willoughby as she let him back inside. It was raining so she didn't leave the door open to the garden today. "I'll come let you out at lunch," she told the dog and went into the shop. Lights were turned on, the music stream started, and Bader put her coffee under the counter as she moved about the space, making sure everything was ready for the doors to open. Satisfied all was in place, Bader unlocked the front doors and flipped the sign to 'open'.

Back behind the counter, a mask hung from one ear, she sipped her coffee and propped her tablet up under the counter to check the news. “Things are not looking good,” she muttered as she read about more and more people exhibiting strange behavior. Oddly enough, the specific strangeness was never labeled or really discussed.

The door chime brought her attention back to the shop and her mask back over both ears. The coffee found its way back under the counter and she gave a smile to the young woman that entered. “Welcome to the Winthrop Literary Society. If you’re looking for something specific, let me know, otherwise enjoy the shop.”

From that moment until nearly a half hour past her usual lunch break, the shop was busy. Coffee long gone cold, Bader picked up the cup and emptied its contents into the sink when she got back into the apartment. “I think it’s going to be a soup and sandwich kind of day. What do you think, Wills?”

Willoughby sat at the edge of the kitchen rug and watched Bader get things out of the fridge to make a sandwich. *“I think I’m gonna sit here and hope she drops something.”*

Bader stopped moving, the cheese slice dangling from her fingers. Slowly, she turned around and looked at Wills. “Did I just hear you?” A shake of her head and Bader turned back. “No way. I just imagined what you’d say.”

“Keep imagining that slice of cheese onto the floor.”

Bader dropped the slice of cheese and backed up against the counter. “Willoughby, do you want to go outside?”

“Hell no, it’s pouring out there. Do you realize how long it takes to get my fur dry just because I need to pee?” Wills finished up the slice of cheese and looked up at Bader. *“You want to drop a slice of ham down here, too?”*

Bader reached over, picked up a slice of ham and tossed it to Willoughby. “How’s that?”

“That’s awesome, thanks. By the way, Mephistopheles is still outside. He’s kinda pissed you forgot him this morning. He’s been hiding under the new roof out there in one of your comfy chairs.”

Bader blinked, then went to the back door and opened it up. Sure enough, Meph was curled up in a cushioned chair under the awning. “Want to come in, Meph?”

“About bloody time. I could’ve drowned out there and you wouldn’t even have noticed. What’s a cat gotta do around here to be remembered? And you say you love me. Show me, don’t tell me,” Meph said as he darted into the house and over to the food bowl.

Bader closed and locked the door, then slid down and sat on the floor. “I’m having a stroke or something. My mind is going.”

Wills came over and nudged her with his nose. *“You’re fine, Mama B. It’s just you can finally hear us. Some people can, you know. Dr. Doolittle wasn’t just a story.”*

Bader curled her fingers into Willoughby’s coat and hugged him to her side. “Where’s Mischief?”

“Hiding under your bed. She doesn’t want you to know she caught a mouse and hid it in your slipper. Oh, and she didn’t bring it in from outside, it was in the apartment,” Willoughby said.

“It’s okay, Mischief. I know you were just leaving me a gift,” Bader called out as Mischief warily padded out of the bedroom to sit well out of reach. “Just so you know,” she said to the cat, “I understand your hunting and leaving me the results is a gift to me – but I’d much rather you took them outside to the back of the garden. The gift, for me, is not having mice in my house. That is greatly appreciated.”

“Ah, well, that makes sense. I’ll remove the mouse from your slipper if you open the door for me?” Mischief said.

Bader got to her feet and opened the door – and Mischief trotted out with the dead mouse. A few moments later, she was darting back inside, shaking the water off.

“Hang on, Missy. I’ll get a towel,” Bader said and grabbed an old towel out of the closet to dry the cat’s fur. “There, is that better?”

“Much. Thank you. Is there any more of that tuna left?”

“I’ll take a look. You’ll have to share it with Meph,” Bader replied. She dumped the food into their dishes, then looked at her own food and sighed. “I was making my lunch. I need to finish doing this. If I’m really having a breakdown of some kind, I should make sure I have food in my system.”

“You’re not having a breakdown. You’re opening up,” Willoughby said as Bader finished making her sandwich. *“Don’t forget the soup. You need something warm.”*

“I’m seriously concerned that I might be hallucinating all of this. Let me just eat in quiet for a few?” Bader said, a faint whimper in her tone. She managed to eat all of the soup and half of her sandwich before Willoughby growled low.

“That evil man from the other night is back. The one that Magnus-sexy-butt chased away for you. I can hear him out front.”

Bader grabbed her phone and stepped through into the shop, using the shadows to hide her presence as she tried to see if Sudya was out there. Then she heard a rattle at the door and the sound of the lock opening. A quick dial to 911 and Bader whispered into the phone. “This is Bader Winthrop at the Literary Society shop on South Main. Someone just broke into my shop while I was on my lunch break. I can see him, but he hasn’t noticed me yet.”

“Can you put a locked door between you and the intruder? If so, do that now,” the operator said.

Bader quietly locked the break room door that led out into the shop, then the one between the break room and her apartment had both locks in place. “I’m in

my apartment in the back, now. There are two locked doors between us – but the front shop door was locked, too. That doesn't seem to slow him down much."

"Officers are en route. Stay on the line, Bader."

She could hear sirens, and then she heard a crash from inside the store. "I'm hearing crashing noises from my store. He's destroying the place!"

"Stay where you are. Things can be replaced. You cannot. The officers just pulled up outside. Hang on a little longer, Bader. They'll be knocking on the inside doors shortly. You can hang up when you see the officers."

A moment later, there was a rap on the door and a voice called out, "Ms. Winthrop, I'm Officer Jessup. We've got your intruder restrained. Can you come out here?"

"Is one of the officers named Jessup?" Bader asked the operator.

"Yes, Jessup and Collins are the two officers. Take care, Bader," the operator said and disconnected the call.

Bader pocketed her phone and unlocked the doors, afraid of what she would find on the other side.

"Ms. Winthrop?" Jessup asked.

"Yes, Officer. I'm Bader Winthrop. Thank you for getting here so quickly."

Jessup looked down at her feet, then nodded. "Making sure you had shoes on. There's glass and debris on the floor."

Bader bit her lip and followed him through the break room into the shop. "Oh, gods," she breathed as she took in the destruction. "Has he said anything? Like, why he did this? What was he looking for?"

Officer Collins had Mr. Sudya handcuffed and held him by his upper arm near the door. Between the door and where Jessup and Bader stood, a path of books, papers, shattered display cases and their contents were a foot deep on the floor. Shelves had been tipped over and their contents tossed around the room with wild abandon.

“He’s not said anything yet,” Jessup replied.

“I *will* find the book,” Sudya yelled when he saw Bader. “Nothing you do will keep it from me. It belongs to *me*, not you, not your parents.”

“What book?” Bader asked.

“Don’t encourage him,” Jessup muttered low to her. “He’s acting like the last few virus victims we’ve dealt with lately. They rant about crazy stuff, then either they’re healed up and go home, or they end up doing something to off themselves.”

“The grimoire, you stupid girl,” Sudya snarled. He was literally spitting and hissing his words, and wasn’t wearing a mask, so Bader stayed back, her own mask firmly in place.

“What grimoire? I have several books called that. Some are novels, some are family histories, recipe books, and one is an alchemical history,” Bader said.

“The Bishop grimoire,” Sudya nearly screamed the words. “Your mother’s inheritance was the Bishop family’s grimoire that dated back to the 1600’s. It has to be here. It wasn’t at the house when it burned.”

Bader froze, one hand reached out to grab at Jessup’s arm. “Wait,” she whispered to the officer.

“What do you know about the house fire?” Bader asked.

“Everything,” Sudya replied as he lifted his chin. “I started it. After I drugged your parents. They never knew what hit them.”

“What did you use to start it?” Bader asked, her voice cracking.

“Magic, you pathetic child,” Sudya replied, then snapped the handcuffs apart. In one movement, he turned and slammed the heel of his hand into Collins’ chest and threw him ten feet back into a wall-mounted book shelf.

Jessup drew his weapon, but Sudya was out the door and gone with a speed that was clearly inhuman. Jessup ran outside, realized the man was gone, and came back in, holstering his weapon as Bader crouched beside Collins.

“Are you hurt?” Bader asked Collins.

“I think I cracked a couple of ribs,” Collins replied.

“Stay still, Jonas,” Jessup said. “I’ll call an ambulance. We don’t need you puncturing a lung or something.”

Bader stayed by Collins until the ambulance arrived, then went to stand near the counter, her gaze taking in the thousands of dollars in damage.

“I’ll email you a copy of the report later tonight,” Jessup told Bader. “Call your insurance company and get them down here before you clean anything up. There’s a bulletin out for Sudya. If he shows up anywhere, he’s to be treated as a threat to the public safety.”

“If he’s really the one behind the murder of my parents, I’m not safe while he’s out there,” Bader said. “And they need justice.”

“Well both Collins and I will have his confession on our recorders, so when we catch him, he’ll be charged with that as well as this.”

“Thank you, Officer Jessup,” Bader said.

“You’re most welcome, Ms. Winthrop. Oh, and make sure you apply for the pandemic benefits. It should help offset some of the insurance costs.”

“Pandemic benefits?” Bader asked.

“Yeah, it’s a government fund that helps businesses impacted by the pandemics. This is a direct cause of someone being infected, so it counts,” Jessup said. “My sister runs a bakery down south, and someone ran in and trashed her place last week. She got help with it, that’s how I know about it.”

“Thank you,” Bader said with a faint smile. “That’s going to help.” She watched the medics carry Collins out, then followed Jessup to the door. “Looks like my first call is to a locksmith. Please, if you can, let me know how Officer Collins makes out?”

“I will. Stay safe,” Jessup said as he went to his patrol car and followed the ambulance down the street.

Bader sighed and used the old frame bolt locks to secure the front outer door, then stepped back in and pulled out her phone. A call to the insurance company, then another to the locksmith down the street, and Bader made her way back into the apartment.

“Don’t go out into the shop, any of you. Please. There’s broken glass and stuff all over. It’ll be cleaned up soon, but I don’t want you guys getting hurt,” Bader told the three furry roommates.

“*Got it, Mama B,*” Willoughby said. “*We’ll stay back here. Are you okay?*”

“I’m fine, Wills. Just a little shaken and a lot angry. I’ll be back here with you all as soon as I can.”

“*Could you turn the TV on the Discovery Animal channel?*” Mephistopheles asked.

Bader blinked at the request, then chuckled. “Sure, why not?” A few minutes later, the three of them were sprawled on the couch, watching TV, and Bader locked the apartment door behind her to wait for the insurance adjuster and locksmith out in the shop. Hopefully, they didn’t make her wait too long. She had a book to find.

It was the morning of the third day after Sudya had trashed the shop, and Bader could finally reopen. Insurance and the government program covered the damage and helped replace the inventory that couldn't be salvaged. It would take a couple of weeks to get the new display cases delivered, but most everything else appeared back to normal.

Everything, except Bader herself. She went to the clinic the day after the attack and had her doctor check her out. Blood work came back that Bader already had antibodies for the new virus. The doctor assumed she had a mild case and was fine. She never told him about being able to hold conversations with her dog and cats. Or that she could hear some people's thoughts if they stood close enough.

As of this morning, she would most definitely *not* be telling him about how she had a book slide out of a shelf out of reach and float down into her hand. Nope. No one needed to know.

Magnus had sent her a potted Gerbera daisy when he heard about the shop being trashed. The note said, *Wish I could be there to help. Know that I'm there in spirit. Looking forward to Friday's social – M.* Bader knew this week was hell

week for the teachers at the local colleges with students moving into dorms last weekend and classes having started up on Monday. She was looking forward to Friday as well, and hoped it was less eventful than last week's gathering had been.

Bader went to the door to flip the sign over to 'open' and pressed her thumb to the biometric lock system to release the security bars. The new door looked old and still fit the style of the building, but it had the latest in security bars that sank into the reinforced walls all around and had no way for someone to pick or hack it from the outside. As part of her new security system, Bader had also had the doors between the shop and her home, and the outside garden to the shop or apartment, also upgraded. The long-unused driveway gate had also been replaced and now Bader could pull through into the back garden, park and unload into the apartment instead of having to carry her purchases through the shop into the house.

When they removed the old wood and iron gates, they found a door in the brick column that looked like it led into a storage nook. Bader had stood by while they used a crowbar to open the slender door, then waited until the workers left her alone before she went to see what was inside. The space was just big enough for her to stand in, with shelves on the three other sides. A metal chest of some kind, two wooden boxes, and a rotted canvas bag full of waxed-cloth wrapped books, was all that was in there. Bader carefully removed the items to a table under the awning, then asked the workers to continue their tasks. The space would be filled with the security bar mechanisms and bricked up once they were done. Bader got a couple of rags and wiped things down before she brought them inside – the metal box almost too heavy for her to manage alone. It ended up on the floor just inside the door, while the other items were laid out on the kitchen table.

"Everything smells funny," Willoughby said.

“Well, they’ve been locked up in a storage closet for gods knows how long,” Bader replied. “This house is over two hundred and fifty years old, you know. The brick wall around the gardens matches the brick of the newer part of the house, which is over two hundred years old. The first part was wood and went up around 1785, but part of it burned down and they rebuilt with brick. The beams and flooring in the shop and the break room are from the original building, that’s why everything creaks and you can roll a ball across the room by putting it on the side near the front windows.”

“You think this stuff’s been in there that long?” Willoughby asked.

“It could have been. The books are wrapped in waxed cloth and tied with twine. The wooden boxes are fitted and pegged, not nailed, so they could be. The metal box looks like it’s closer to the very early 1900’s, like World War I era.”

Bader found a few signed first edition rare books in the wrapped volumes, and she put them in the fire safe in her closet. She wanted to really look them over before she decided to keep them or auction them off. The wooden boxes contained faded letters, dried flowers, and some bits and pieces of silver jewelry, thimbles, and a couple of spoons. Two bits of ancient scrimshaw on actual whalebone found their way to her curio cabinet. She’d have to have them dated at some point.

After spending about an hour trying to get the metal box open, Bader left it and cleaned up the mess, took a shower, and got on with her day. It sat off to the side of the garden door, temporarily forgotten.

Now it was a couple of days later and the box had a pair of boots on top, a bag set in front of it, and had become a piece of furniture instead of a treasure that needed to be opened.

Business picked up as if there had been no interruption. It kept Bader busy from opening to closing so that Friday seemed to sneak up on her. When Magnus

called and asked if she needed anything for the social, her gasp of surprise told him everything he needed to know.

“Don’t worry, Bader. Just take care of the coffee, and I’ll take care of the rest,” Magnus sent in the text.

There were customers in and out of the shop right up to closing time. So much so that Bader had to lock the door, flip the sign to ‘closed’, then go back and ring up the purchases of the last four customers. She let them out, then locked the inside door and shut off the overhead lights. A quick shower and change of clothes, a hastily eaten sandwich for dinner, then the front door chime started to ring. Bader went to see who it was and smiled at Magnus on the other side of the glass. He pointed towards the gates and waved his phone at her. Bader pulled hers out of her pocket and read the text that said, *“I’m here, can you open the gate?”* that had been sent five minutes ago. She shot him a thumbs up and raced back into the apartment to put in the code that opened the gate. Marcus pulled his car in beside hers, and Bader closed the gates once more. With the doors and windows open to the warm evening, Bader called out to Magnus, “I’ll be right there.”

“No worries. I’ll get the chairs arranged if you could get the table out?” Magnus replied.

Bader carried out the folding table and set it up, spread a cloth over it, then went back to get the coffee machines and set them on each end of the table. By the time she’d plugged them in, Magnus had put out baskets of coffee pods, a rack of napkins, a box of tea bags and an electric kettle, as well as a selection of individually wrapped pastries and cookies. A metal washtub was placed over to the side and filled with ice, then individual size bottles of wine, beer, soft drinks, and water were stuck into the ice to chill.

Bader started to drag chairs into place and Magnus hurried to get the rest before she could finish. “I said I’d take care of it, Bader.”

“I know, and it looks amazing, but I’m not good at not helping.”

“I want to do this for you. Please let me?” Magnus asked, eyes gleaming above his mask. *“I don’t know how to tell you I’m falling in love with you, so let me show you?”*

Bader stumbled a step and turned to look at Magnus. “What did you say?”

“I said I want to do this for you.”

“No, the part about showing me?” Bader asked.

“I didn’t say that,” Magnus said after a pause. “I thought it.” *“Can you hear my thoughts?”*

“Can you hear mine?” Bader thought back at him.

“Yes,” Magnus said.

“Yeah, me too,” Bader replied. *“And I’m falling for you, too.”*

“Good, so you’re both in heat. Could you please come feed us before you forget?” Willoughby sent to them both.

“Oh, good. I thought I had lost my mind when my neighbor’s cat started explaining that if I didn’t let her in to catch mice in my place once in a while, it would make it harder to keep them on their side of the walls,” Magnus said, tone dry. “Now I know I can hear dogs, too? That’s a relief.”

“This time around? I think the pandemic has something to do with changing our brain chemistry or something,” Bader said.

“Or it just opens up skills that we were predisposed towards having and hadn’t evolved enough to use yet,” Magnus replied.

“I’ll go feed the furballs. Could you find me a nice light wine? I think I’m going to need it tonight,” Bader said.

“You’ve got it. Can we shut this down around nine-thirty tonight so we have some time to talk afterwards?”

“Absolutely,” Bader replied and stepped inside.

“Now you smell different,” Willoughby said. *“Is that ‘cause you’re in heat?”*

“Willoughby, behave,” Bader hissed as she filled food bowls and topped off the water. “We don’t talk about that kind of thing around strangers. And who knows how many other folks can hear you? Please, unless there’s a problem, be good tonight? For me?”

“He’s not a stranger, but yeah, I’ll be quiet unless something’s wrong. If I smell that Broken Man on anyone, I’ll let you know.”

The ‘Broken Man’ is what they called Sudya, because he broke so much stuff in the shop. “Thank you, Willoughby. I appreciate it.” Bader got her wine tumbler, then paused when Mephistopheles parked himself in front of the screen door.

“What is it, Meph?”

“Perhaps you could ask that mate of yours to open the chest for you? It’s in my favorite sun spot in the afternoons,” Meph said.

“I’ll ask him,” Bader said. “Thanks for the reminder. Now, please behave. All of you.”

The evening’s gathering was uneventful, with about a dozen attendees who discussed Tigner’s book and enjoyed the refreshments.

The only really remarkable moment was when Dr. Eli Howe slipped a note into her hand. “I heard about your troubles this past week, and wanted to help out. Please don’t refuse me.”

Bader looked at the paper and blinked. It was a receipt for a bank transfer. “Dr. Eli, I can’t. This is too much.”

“Abby and Henry Winthrop were my friends,” Dr. Eli said. “Our families had been friends for generations. Let me share this with you?”

“I’ll accept it, only if you accept that you can have any book you want, for the rest of your days, for free,” Bader told him. “I’ve cherished your wisdom and advice for years, Dr. Eli. Thank you.”

A gentle pat on her shoulder and the doctor went to refill his coffee cup, select a cookie, then found a seat near Maggie Carmichael to join in the conversation.

“Are you okay?” Magnus sent to her.

“I’m fine. Just stunned. Dr. Eli had a deposit made to help me out after the past week. It’s a rather large sum.”

Magnus just gave her a nod and a smile, his eyes crinkling above the mask, before he turned to speak to Jeff Jacobs, another shop regular.

Bader tucked the slip of paper deep into her pocket, then took a sip of her wine. “I hope you can see this, Mom and Dad. I’m keeping your traditions alive.” Dr. Eli wasn’t a medical doctor, he was a specialist in global markets and finance. He had been the one to help Bader with the financial tangle her parents had left when they died. A widower, he had grown children and a couple of grandchildren, but he always treated Bader as if she were part of his family. Suddenly, she had a thought and went to tap Dr. Eli on the shoulder. “I’m sorry, could I speak with you for a moment?”

He got up and joined her a few steps away and Bader smiled. “I’m so sorry, but I remembered something I wanted to ask you. When the shop was trashed earlier this week, the man, Mr. Sudya, said he was looking for the Bishop grimoire. I’ve never seen anything...”

Dr. Eli’s eyes went wide and he sucked in a breath. “He was looking for *what?*”

“The Bishop grimoire,” Bader said.

“He didn’t find it, did he?”

“Uh, no? I don’t think I have anything even remotely close to what he was looking for. I have a few books that are called ‘grimoire’ but they’re cookbooks or herbalist references, or novels with that in the name.”

Dr. Eli shook his head. “No, this is an ancient book. When I last saw it, it was about six inches thick, hand-bound leather with brass clasps to hold it closed. It’s

about ten inches wide and twelve inches high. The leather over wood cover is a mottled brown from age and has an elaborate letter B embossed on the front with vines and leaves intertwined. The pages are rough-edged and of rag and fiber, so a bit thicker than we're currently used to seeing. If you find the book, do not let anyone know. It has been passed from generation to generation for over five hundred years."

"I've never seen anything like that, and I doubt I will, but thank you for the information. I should probably also tell you that Sudya confessed to killing my parents and burning the house down – after he searched it for the grimoire."

"He probably was the one that searched the shop that night, too. I came with Amelia and the kids the next day and cleaned it all up. Every older book had been searched, every cabinet, case, chest, or closet had been ransacked."

"I wonder what possessed him to come back and try again?" Bader asked.

"I heard that when the cops caught him, he was infected with the virus. He's lapsed into a coma and they don't know if he'll live to stand trial," Dr. Eli said.

"What exactly is *in* this book that is so valuable? So rare that it cost my parents their lives?"

"You know what a grimoire is, Bader. What do you *think* is in it?" Dr. Eli chided gently.

"Magic isn't real, Doc. So it's probably a family journal with recipes and how much it cost to wash sheets or something."

Dr. Eli shook his head and sighed. "Abby Bishop Winthrop's daughter, saying magic isn't real. Now I've heard it all. Okay, Bader. I'll remind you of this conversation after you find the book." He chuckled and headed back to his coffee cup and previous conversation.

Bader wondered if maybe the good doctor had been infected as well. He wasn't acting very sane.

It didn't take long to clean up the patio after people left, and Magnus was true to his word as he loaded his things into his car, then helped sort out chairs and tables, bottles and trash.

"Before we settle down by the fire pit, could I ask a favor? Do you have bolt cutters in your tool kit?" Bader asked.

"I do, what do you need?"

"I found an old metal chest, looks like it was from around World War I, and the latches have rusted so I can't get it open. It's pretty beat up, so I just want to cut the hinges and latches so the lid lifts off."

"Oh, yeah. I can do that. Where's the chest?" Magnus asked.

"Inside the apartment door. It's really heavy, so I left it there. Mephistopheles is getting annoyed that it's taking up his favorite sunning spot."

Magnus grabbed the bolt cutters and followed Bader inside. He indulged his curiosity and glanced around before he crouched beside the box and pulled it away from the wall. "This looks like an old ammo crate. I should probably take it outside to open it, just in case. Do you have any idea what might be in it?"

“Probably just books and papers. The rest of the stuff from that old closet was odds and ends of things and a few wrapped up books.”

“Well, let’s be safe, just in case,” Magnus said. He handed the cutters to Bader and lifted the box. Outside, he set it down on the low stone wall at one side of the patio, away from the house. Bader used her phone as a flashlight to add to the patio lights, then handed the cutters back. It didn’t take Magnus long to cut through the latches, then use the cutters to help pop the lid open. The hinges screeched as he forced the lid up, then stepped back so Bader could look inside.

“That thing is lead lined,” Magnus said in wonder.

“Well, it doesn’t look like anything that’s going to explode,” Bader said. “It’s another wrapped book and some papers in a leather folio.”

“In a lead-lined box? That’s overkill, don’t you think?” Magus said.

“I’m going to take these inside. Could you put that in the garden shed? Do you want coffee or more wine?” Bader asked.

“Wine, if it’s okay for me to leave my car here until tomorrow,” Magnus said.

“Not a problem,” Bader replied as she carried the items into the house and came out with a bottle of her favorite white zinfandel and two wine glasses. Magnus had pulled two of the cushioned chairs closer to the fire pit and fed in a couple more logs. Bader sat the wine and glasses on the low table, then poured them each a glass and picked up a pastry and settled in to nibble. The sound of the shed door being closed told her where Magnus was, so she held out a glass as he came over.

“This is my favorite wine, and I’m sharing it,” Bader said.

Magnus accepted the glass and relaxed into the second chair. “Now this is nice,” he said after a sip. “Wine, good company, and a crackling fire.”

“Thank you so much for your help tonight. It’s been a crazy couple of weeks and I feel like I’ve been taking three steps forward and two steps back. And now

I'm worried I've lost what little sanity I had, thinking I can hear your thoughts, or hold conversations with my animals."

Magnus reached out and took her hand where it lay on the arm of the chair. "You're not crazy. They're not telling the public what's going on, but I've got friends in Homeland Security that told me a bit of what's really happening. This new virus? It's nothing like any other virus. In fact, they don't truly consider it a 'virus' at all. It's as if everyone's brain chemistry is changing overnight. For some people, it means enhanced senses, awakened abilities – things many people would consider magic. For others? They lose whatever grip on sanity they once had and end up hurting themselves – or others."

"Then why are they calling it a virus?" Bader asked.

"Because the public has been conditioned to handle a virus and take precautions. How do you tell people to stop breathing the air because they're going to develop telepathy or telekinesis or whatever else is showing up?" Magnus said.

"True. But they said they can test for antibodies?" Bader asked.

"It changes something in the blood chemistry. I'm no biologist or chemist, but apparently the neurological changes trigger whole body changes and something new shows up in the blood. There's so much we don't understand about the brain, even this close to the year 2070. Whole areas of the brain that have gone unused by humans in ways that science would understand are still unmapped. I let a friend who works in the medical college do a scan of my brain after I started hearing the cat. He said a whole region is lit up that is not usually. He said he's been seeing that more frequently in people that have the new blood markers."

"I'm not sure I like the idea of complete strangers reading my thoughts," Bader said with a nervous laugh. "That's the kind of thing that will have me wrapping aluminum foil around my head like a hat."

“Haha, very funny. Tinfoil hats won’t work for this, and you know it. My cousin, Sinara, said we can construct mental barriers to protect ourselves. She’s always been considered a *sensitive* person – you know, the kind of person that knows who’s about to knock on the door when they weren’t expected, or can tell you not to take that turn because there’s going to be an accident? Psychic is the common term, I believe,” Magnus said.

“So, a mental box to protect your thoughts?” Bader asked.

“Yep. Here, try and read my thoughts,” Magnus said.

Bader closed her eyes and frowned. “Nothing. But then I’ve only heard thoughts when they’re sent my way. I can’t just randomly read someone’s mind.”

“*But you can hear me now, right?*” Magnus sent.

“I can. Can you just read my thoughts?”

Magnus shook his head. “No. But when you send thoughts to me, I can.”

“See? We’ve already solved one problem. No random intrusions, just silent conversations. Okay, so what else have you discovered?” Bader asked.

Magnus put the wine glass down on the table, then picked up a bottle of water. He curled his hand around it and focused – and the water slowly iced over. He handed the bottle to Bader and she stared in wonder.

“Well, if I ever run out of ice...” Bader said and Magnus snorted a laugh.

“I’m glad you’re not freaked out by this,” Magnus said.

“I’ve read enough paranormal and supernatural stories to be somewhat adjusted to the idea of magic seeping into the real world. I just never thought I’d see it happen for myself.”

“I struggle with it, still. I mean, right now? It’s a novelty. And a mystery. The government isn’t telling the public anything and people are really scared. I think it’s probably a good idea to not let on that we’ve changed and keep an eye on those we care about.”

“We’ve seen in history how those who are different are treated. Just a few decades ago, people who looked like us were victimized and terrorized by the very people supposed to protect us. Skin color, presentation of preferred gender, even who someone loved was reason enough to be treated as ‘other’. I agree that we need to be circumspect, but shouldn’t we also try and connect with those in the community who are afraid and think they’re the only ones dealing with this?” Bader asked.

“Let’s think about how best to do that...later. Right now? I would very much like to kiss you,” Magnus said.

The fire pit was down to embers when they eventually made their way inside. The bedroom door was closed. Neither one of them wanted to hear what the four-legged residents thought of their activities.

The next morning, Bader woke to the smell of pancakes, bacon, and coffee. She stretched and slid out of bed, aching in all the right places as she stepped into the shower. Jeans and a t-shirt, her hair twisted up into a head scarf, and she made her way into the kitchen. “Something smells wonderful.”

“I thought I’d make us breakfast. I had thought to serve it in bed, but I heard you shower, so maybe we can eat it on the patio? I let the three of them out, fed Willoughby and both cats, and they’re out enjoying the gardens right now,” Magnus said.

“You changed clothes?” Bader asked after she kissed him good morning.

“My gym gear was in my car. I had clean shorts and a t-shirt – the same jeans as yesterday. I took a shower when I got up, then came out to find coffee...and ended up cooking. It’s okay, right? Willoughby didn’t think you’d mind.”

“It’s all okay. Shower, food, whatever. And I’m trying to not laugh at the fact you got advice from my dog.”

Magnus pulled her against him and kissed her once more, then handed her a plate. “Here, carry these out and I’ll get the rest?”

“Only if there are more kisses later. I drive a hard bargain, mister,” Bader teased in return.

Soon they were enjoying breakfast and the antics of Mischief who was intent on catching a butterfly that stayed just out of her reach.

“I was wondering if you wanted to come stay at my place?” Magnus asked as they had finished eating and were enjoying their coffee.

“Why? If you’re in those staff apartments, I already know my place is larger. Besides, what would I do with the animals?”

“Well, I’m worried about you being here alone with all of the trouble you’ve had of late. I care for you and I want you to be safe,” Magnus said.

“And I appreciate that, but I’m a grown woman with a top-of-the-line security system and three animals that can smell trouble on the other side of the street. I’ll be fine. However, if you’re worried and want to spend some time here, that’s acceptable.”

“It’s kind of fast, isn’t it?” Magnus said. “I mean, we’re already talking about sharing our living space and we’ve only spent one night together.”

“Yeah, maybe. But I feel like I can trust you, on a level I’ve never experienced. It’s like we’ve known each other for years instead of weeks.”

“It’s like we just clicked – and we know we belong together.”

“Exactly that. Do we trust this?” Bader asked. “Or is it some side effect of the changes?”

“I think it may be a side effect, in that we can see each other more clearly than before. I’ll go home and pack up a few things and come back. Are you opening the shop today?” Magnus asked.

“I’ll be open from ten until four today. I have to do some inventory and stocking shelves, so I’m closing early,” Bader replied.

“Want some help with that?” Magnus asked.

“Sure, if you can take direction without being offended,” Bader replied. “I’m rather particular about how things are done, and I have a system that works. I’m willing to listen to suggestions that may make things easier but watch and learn before you start telling me how to change things. I fired someone who decided they knew how to do my job better than I knew it, because they messed things up so bad it took me months to fix the chaos they created.”

“Sounds like how I am in my classroom. I will follow and learn, oh wise Bader. Now, let me go get the dishes cleaned up and you can let me out before you open up?” Magnus said.

“I’ll clean up, you cooked. I’ve got an hour before I open, that’s plenty of time,” Bader replied as she got out of her seat and moved to straddle him where he sat. “You *did* promise me kisses.”

“Oh, yes, I did, didn’t I?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Magnus stayed for a week, and they both decided it worked well, so he let his studio at the college go and fully moved in with Bader. They made room for his few possessions and in the shuffling around, the contents of the metal box were tucked onto a shelf and forgotten.

It wasn't until nearly six weeks since they'd opened the box that Bader remembered she hadn't really looked at the items they'd taken out of it. She had moved some books out of her bedroom to make space for some of Magnus' things and spotted the stack on the shelf behind the sofa. "Wow, I forgot all about this stuff."

"We didn't. It really smelled bad when you first brought it in. Now it just smells old," Willoughby said.

Mischief, who seemed to be the most quiet of the three, padded over to Bader and perched on the sofa beside her, her gaze on the pile that now resided on the coffee table. *"It smells like old magic,"* she said.

Bader put the smaller wrapped pile of papers to one side and carefully untied the cords holding the waxed cloth covering on what felt like a book.

Once the first layer had been peeled back, Bader froze. An envelope sat on top of the brown paper wrapping with her name on it. She recognized the handwriting – it was her mother’s. She sat for a few long minutes, staring at the writing while the sun streamed in through the wide window, the scent of herbs and flowers drifting in on the summer breeze.

“Are you going to open it or not?” asked Willoughby.

Bader reached for the envelope and pulled out the folded papers inside. “*My dearest Bader, If you’re reading this, then we’ve left you alone and I’m unable to explain this all to you in person. I’m sorry, my girl. Know that your father and I love you beyond all measure and if we could be with you as you learn about this, we would.*

The book in front of you holds my family history – your family history. Your ancestor, Mikoa, was a Native American woman who worked for Bridget Playfer. Bridget is the one who married Edward Bishop, and ended up being the first to die during the Salem trials. We’re descended from Edward’s first wife, Hanna, and from Mikoa, through Hanna and Edward’s eldest son – also named Edward, who officially married Sarah Mary Wildes. Mikoa was given to Edward and Sarah as a wedding gift. As was the custom with slaves during that time, Mikoa bore four children for Edward. Two sons and two daughters, who grew up with Edward and Sarah’s children as their servants. Unlike many of that era, Mikoa and her children were taught to read and write. Mikoa Bishop was the first to write in this book.

Enoch, also known as Kanozas Bishop, is your eleventh great-grandfather. He partnered with Hester, a woman of Caribbean heritage, and they had a dozen children. Their son, Henry, earned his freedom by fighting in the Revolutionary War. He and his wife, Martha, moved to Atusville, a mixed race community in Machias, Maine. Maine was still called Massachusetts at that time.

Your father and I met at university in Boston, then settled in Bishop's Bay because of our work at the college – as you know. What you don't know is that the bookstore building was the home built by Edward and Sarah after they escaped the witches' prison and left Salem town. It has been in the family since the late 1600's and holds secrets it only cares to reveal in its own time. If it allowed you to find this book, then it's time for you to learn the truth about our family.

Know this, my darling—with truth comes responsibility. Don't be afraid of who, and what, you are. Embrace the truth and the magic and be secure in the love your father and I wrap you in, no matter which side of the veil we're on.

If you still have questions, see if the Bishops in Machias are willing to give you answers. If it's still there, the Bishop Bindery bookstore should have family that can help.

*All my love, my sweet girl, forever and ever after,
Mom”*

Bader's hands shook as she folded the pages back up and slid them into the envelope. Gently, she kissed the envelope and lay it back on top of the book. The waxed cloth wrapping was pulled back around it and tied shut, then the whole thing was put into the fire safe in her bedroom closet.

“Why are you not opening the book?” Willoughby asked.

“I'm not ready,” Bader replied.

“She's afraid,” Mephistopheles said. “And I don't blame her. I could feel the power coming off that thing across the room.”

“I'm not afraid, I just want to think about the letter a bit before I take the next step.”

“Uh huh. You're afraid. It's okay to be afraid – but you're not alone in this. You can ask Magnus to be there for you when you do open it,” Mischief said.

“I don’t want any of you saying anything about the book or the letter to Magnus, understood? I’ll discuss it with him in my own time,” Bader said.

“She means never,” Mephistopheles said.

“No, I don’t mean never, I just need some time. Enough, all of you. Go outside. I’m going to make tea and think.”

The three four-legged residents pushed the screen curtain open and slipped out into the garden while Bader boiled water and fixed herself a cup of tea. Mischief was right, she was afraid. Change was scary and there had been a lot of change in her world already this year. Most of the change had been positive – like having Magnus in her life. Some of the change had been scary – like having the shop trashed, finding out Sudya had killed her parents, and discovering these new skills. She and Magnus had had a long discussion about what they wanted out of the relationship, and things they would and would not compromise on. Being up front and honest with each other, no matter what, was a big one for them both. Bader knew she would have to talk about the book and letter with Magnus tonight. If she waited, she would be lying by omission and that was not okay.

Mug of tea in hand, Bader went to the screen-covered doorway. “Missy? What did you mean you could feel the power?”

“I mean,” Mischief said from her sprawled position on the sun-warmed patio stones, *“that the power in that book was like sitting near the wood stove in the winter. It radiated power like the stove radiates heat.”*

“Was it...evil?” Bader asked.

“Power is power,” Mephistopheles said. *“Good or evil depends on how that power is used. A knife is used to cut meat or slice bread, but it is also used to stab a human and end a life. How it is used, determines whether the use was for good or for evil. Same with that book – and the power it contains.”*

“How do you guys know about power and magic? I mean, I got you, Mischief, as a kitten. Mephistopheles and Willoughby were older when I rescued them. You live normal animal life spans, right?”

“Cats tend to reincarnate rather quickly and when we’ve been around magic or power or whatever you want to call it, we are often brought around again near places of power, so we can continue to help magic wielders. Like you. I was also Amadeus and Moxie with your parents, and then you,” Mephistopheles said, *“before I spent a couple of years with another person. I returned to him as Mephistopheles, but it was his turn to die, so I went to the shelter to be found by you,”*

“Wait, you were Moxie?” Bader stared at her cat. “But Moxie was a female tortoiseshell.”

“We’re not so fussy about what type of cat or gender we return as, as long as we can be with the right people. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it does not.”

“You died in the house fire with Mom and Dad, didn’t you?” Bader said, voice soft.

“I did. It was a sudden ending without a plan in place, which is why I didn’t come back to you right away. I spent my first three years after the fire with Father Reilly, but when he died, I went to the shelter where you found me.”

“Dogs are a little different,” Willoughby said. *“All we know is out there, but when we are born, we have to learn how to access it. When we die, all we’ve learned goes up into the cloud and adds to the group knowledge. We only get one round, but we’re there when you go, to help you find your way and make it less scary.”*

“What’s your story, Mischief?” Bader asked.

“I’m here for you, and for Magnus. I was his cat when he was a child, then did ten years as a cat for Tabitha Burroughs, before I was reborn as your kitten.”

“This is kind of blowing my mind, but it also makes my heart happy. I always hated that our time with you was so short.”

“You know that old movie you watched, with the elves in it? That’s what you seem like to us. You live so long, compared to our lives, that you seem almost mystical. That we get to share any part of it is wonderful,” Willoughby said.

“So, Mischief – what was Magnus like as a child?” Bader asked.

“Oh, no, that’s against the rules. We can’t share intimacies from previous pairings,” Mischief said.

“But I can tell you that your parents were both magical. They could hold whole conversations mentally, like you and Magnus can do now. Abby had telekinetic and psychometric abilities while Henry had channeling and precognitive abilities,” Mephistopheles said.

“Wait a minute, though. Dad was a Winthrop, not a Bishop, and the grimoire is from the Bishop line.”

“The Winthrop grimoire was lost in a fire in 1923,” Mephistopheles said. “But all of the Mayflower passengers and most of the Winthrop fleet were magic touched. That’s the real reason they escaped Europe.”

“Winthrop and Brewster, if Magnus’ line goes back to that family, as well as Bishop and Native Abenaki lineage are all tangled up in this,” Bader said. “But, wait a minute, Meph. We were taught that the Puritans were highly biblical and shunned anything remotely pagan. They didn’t have Christmas or Easter celebrations, for example.”

“Ever wonder why everything said they were so strict? It’s because they went way overboard in trying to hide their abilities. They’d already been chased out of two homes – England and Holland – they didn’t want to end up getting uprooted from the last place on earth they could possibly try and survive.”

“And this is probably a case of their attempts to over-emphasize the purity of the situation to hide the truth of the matter,” Bader mused. “Wait, Dad had

precog? Why didn't he know about the fire, then?"

Meph rubbed his head against Bader's arm. "*His precog didn't work for himself, just others.*"

"That doesn't seem fair now, does it?" Bader said. "Well, I'm going to order something special for dinner and then talk to Magnus tonight. Thanks, guys."



"This was nice," Magnus said. "But I'm concerned I might have missed an anniversary or holiday of some kind."

"No, I need to talk to you about something that's going to be difficult for me, so I decided to make it easier by ordering dinner and staying as relaxed as possible," Bader said.

Magnus reached over and took her hand. "Just tell me, love. I'm here for you, no matter what. You know that, right?"

"I do, and I appreciate that more than I can say," Bader replied, then refilled their wine glasses and took a sip of her own. "I unwrapped the book that was in that lead-lined box today. I didn't finish unwrapping it, because under the waxed cloth covering, there was a letter from my mother addressed to me."

"Oh, wow," Magnus murmured.

"Yeah. She apologized for not being here and told me the book was the Bishop Grimoire and that it was now mine to understand and safeguard. I've been processing my feelings all day since I found it, and I went from grief to anger to wonder and now I'm a mix of all three. I'm angry that they were taken from me and I'm angry that I now have this *legacy* to deal with. I miss them something fierce and the grief is as fresh as it was six years ago. Lastly, I'm in awe that magic has apparently been a factor in my life and I didn't know

anything about it until I was exposed to something that awakened my latent skills.”

“Will you share the letter with me?” Magnus asked.

“I will, in a few. She told me about my ancestry. I'm descended from Edward Bishop and Mikoa, an Abenaki woman owned first by Bridget Playfer Bishop and Edward senior. She was given to Edward Jr and his wife, Sarah Mary Wildes, when they wed. They fled from Salem to Bishop's Bay and built this very house. Mikoa and Edward's son, Enoch Kanozas Bishop partnered with Hester, a Caribbean woman. Their son, Henry, earned his freedom by fighting in the Revolutionary War. He and his wife, Martha, moved to Atusville.”

“I know Atusville, it was a sub-community of Machias,” Magnus said.

“Exactly. A lot of our family stayed in that area from that point on. My parents met in college in Boston and moved to Bishop's Bay for work. They both taught classes at the college, Mom part time while she ran the bookstore. This house was sold to them by family – they bought this instead of having a big wedding as was common back then.”

“I'm glad that the whole legal marriage thing is over. Neither of us are property to be bought, sold, or traded—even willingly to each other. We are our own people,” Magnus said.

“Agreed. Now that the government recognizes women and men as equal beings under the law, it's no longer needed. We're adults, we don't need a governmental overseer,” Bader replied.

“And when it comes to naming our children, there are a variety of options. I've always liked giving them both names and letting them choose,” Magnus said.

“That works for me,” Bader replied. “Some have given the female children the mother's surname and the male children the father's surname. I can see that

working for some, but children should be allowed to decide for themselves when they're older. Not all gender born children stay with that as they grow."

"True. Or we could just give them Bishop as a surname since we share a Bishop ancestor. Wrestling with the Devil Brewster had a son John. John Brewster moved to Kennebec and met Willow, an Abenaki woman. William, their son, had children with another native woman, Minnow. Their son, John Brewster, married a Jamaican woman, Cora. Their son, Adam, moved to Atusville and married Abigail Bishop. She's the sister of one of your great-grandparents – so around the late 1700s, our families connected."

"I like that idea. So, this grimoire is part of your heritage, too," Bader said.

"I'm not a big fan of coincidence, Bader," Magnus said. "The world is about to get a reality check that is going to cause chaos on a global scale we've never seen before. What we call magic, is real, and everyone with the latent ability is being awakened. Some adapt to it and learn how to process this new reality, while some are unable to adapt and attack others or themselves. Everything is going to change, and I'm really glad I have you at my side to get through this."

Bader gave him a kiss, then got to her feet. "I'll go get the book and letter. Could you clear the dishes and pour us more wine?"

Hours later, they'd shared the letter and unwrapped the book, taking their time with each page. Luckily, Magnus' degree in literature and folklore had gained him precious experience in deciphering old handwriting samples. It allowed him to read the oldest pages and Bader recorded it on her phone for later transcription.

"Can you believe our mutual great-whatever-grandma wrote this?" Bader said as she touched the edge of a page that Mikoa Bishop had written upon. "Magic must be involved to keep this book in such good condition."

"I think we can agree to that," Magnus replied. "I'm getting a bit of an energy boost, just touching this thing."

“We need to be careful,” Bader said. “It has to live in the fire safe. That safe has a layer of lead, and I think that’s what keeps the magic the book radiates, from being detected.”

“Explains why it was in a lead-lined box,” Magnus said. “And why it stayed hidden for so long.”

“Sudya can’t be the only person looking for it,” Bader mused. She leaned back and sipped her wine as she watched Magnus gently turn pages. “He doesn’t seem like the mastermind type. He wasn’t methodical enough.”

“If you think that, then whoever pulled his strings could still be out there. We need to be careful.”

“Don’t forget to tell him about me,” Mischief said.

“Tell me what about Mischief?” Magnus asked.

“You tell him, Missy,” Bader replied.

Mischief jumped up onto Magnus’ lap. *“I used to be Shadow in one of my previous lives.”*

“Shadow? My cat Shadow?” Magnus asked, then gently pulled Mischief into his arms and snuggled her close. “I don’t know how this is true, but it’s awesome. I’ve missed you, furball.”

“I’ve missed you, too. Took you long enough to find Bader – and me.”

“And don’t worry, she refused to share any secrets from child Magnus. It’s not allowed,” Bader said.

“Let’s put this back in the safe. Do you have a box or something we can put it in so anyone looking into the safe doesn’t automatically see an old book?”

“Let me go look. I got a few deliveries the other day and I think the boxes are still stacked in the break room,” Bader said.

She came back with a couple of options and they decided to line the box with the cloth, then lay the book on it and fold it over before the lid was pressed on.

Magnus carried it into the bedroom and Bader opened the safe and took it from him to place inside. Once the door was closed, they both sighed.

“It’s already quieter in my head, with that book in the safe,” Bader said.

“I didn’t realize how much white noise it generated until it stopped,” Magnus replied. “I get the reason for the lead box now.”

“Yeah, me too. Can you check everything and make sure we’re all locked up while I finish the dishes?” Bader asked.

“Sure, I’ll meet you in bed,” Magnus said with a kiss.

From that point on, each night they would go over another couple of pages of the book. Bader bought a nicely bound journal and copied out the pages into the journal with the translations into modern English. Through the book, they learned that they had familial ties to the Wildes, Burroughs, and Howe families still in Bishop's Bay. Dr. Eli Howe had been more correct than Bader imagined when he said their families had been friends for generations. She had figured he meant two or three generations – not twelve to eighteen, going back to the 1600s and the escape from Salem for those that survived the witch trials.

As time went on, the pandemic problems grew more extreme. Shops were closed to physical traffic, all grocery and medicines were delivery only, in person classes were canceled and the only real traffic one might see were the automated vehicles doing the deliveries. Bader and Magnus were lucky in that they had enough space to work separately, and an enclosed garden to get some sunshine and fresh air. They cleaned out one of the unused rooms on the shop side and Magnus set up his office there. He had a window that looked out to the empty field at the side of the house, and plenty of space for his desk and books. He taught his classes online and Bader handled the online book orders with an

automated vehicle that would pick up the packages twice a day. The Literary Society took to group online gatherings that weren't as good as the in person ones, but it was still nice to have some discussion and socializing with like-minded people.

With the lack of in person contact, it was a bit of a surprise to find Dr. Eli Howe in their driveway one evening. He called to ask if they would let him in, as it was urgent and needed to be discussed in person. They opened the back gate and he drove through, the lights off on his vehicle so no one would see.

Bader came out to the patio, Magnus behind her. "Dr. Eli, are you okay?"

"I'm worried about the two of you," the doctor replied. "You found the book, and it's been in and out of shielding for almost a month now, correct?"

"How do you know?" Bader asked.

"Those of us sensitive to magic can feel it. You need to keep it shielded and don't take it out for a while. It's like sending up a flare every time it's out in the open. I only figured out what it was because I knew your mother left it to you."

"It was in a lead-lined box," Magnus said. "Now we know why."

"Have you both developed...new skills?" Dr. Eli sent to them both.

"We have," Bader replied. "More than one. Come inside, Dr. Eli. Let's have some tea and talk about all of this? I have questions."

"I can come in for a little while, but I think I'm being watched. About a week ago, I started just getting in the car and asking it to drive randomly. I wanted to let whoever has been watching me believe I just needed to get a change of scenery. They stopped following me on my trips two days ago."

Once inside, Bader made tea and sandwiches and the three of them sat around the table.

"Thanks for this, Bader," Dr. Eli said. "I forget to eat when I get stressed. I didn't realize how hungry I was until you put the sandwiches on the table."

"I can heat you up some soup to go with it?" Bader offered.

“No, this is good with the tea. Things are getting crazy out there, aren’t they?” Dr. Eli said.

“It’s worse than any of the past few pandemics,” Magnus agreed. “People are reacting more violently to perceived injustices and limitations. We’ve ordered protective mesh for the windows in case they start smashing up businesses again.”

“I’m glad to see you are together. It’s hard to go through this alone,” Dr. Eli said. “My children all have their own lives, and it’s not right for me to intrude on anyone. I don’t want to leave Bishop’s Bay. I have put my more precious mementos into a secure, fire-safe storage facility. I was wondering if I could bring some of my books here for storage?”

“Of course,” Bader said. She looked at Magnus and sent “*We should have him stay with us here. We can clean out one of the upstairs rooms in the shop and he’ll have some privacy, and not be alone.*”

“*I think that’s a brilliant idea. We can phrase it as him being here will help us,*” Magnus sent in return.

“Would you consider perhaps moving in with us, Dr. Eli?” Bader asked. “We could really use your help with the magical stuff, and with anything else you want to pitch in on. There’s a suite of rooms up over the shop that could be your bedroom, bath, and sitting area, and we could take meals together...” her voice trailed off as she saw tears slide down the elderly man’s cheeks.

“You are so like your mother,” Dr. Eli whispered. “I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“You’re not,” Magnus said. “I’m teaching virtually, Bader is filling orders and shipping from home, and neither one of us has a parental figure we can turn to for advice and wisdom. There are several rooms up over the shop and I use one of them for my office. Clearing out a couple to give you a safe space is no trouble at all.”

“I would be honored,” Dr. Eli said, his voice so soft. “I didn’t come here, expecting this kind of generosity.”

“And you’re giving us so much by doing this. You will stay here tonight on the guest cot, where we know you’re safe, and tomorrow, Magnus will go with you to help you pack and get things shipped over. He’s got friends that can have you settled in tomorrow evening. I’ll get the rooms cleaned and freshened. You’ll be in your own bed upstairs by tomorrow night.”

“I agree to all of this. I haven’t slept well since I realized I was being followed. Knowing I’m safe here, with all of you, will ease my mind enough to rest,” Dr. Eli said. “It was exhausting, trying to think of ways to get myself safe while not leaving Bishop’s Bay. My Amelia is buried here. I don’t want to be a state or two away from her, even now.”

“I’ll make up the guest bed,” Bader said and gave Dr. Eli a hug before she left him with Magnus.

“I don’t have much to move,” he told Magnus. “My Amelia and I downsized to a one bedroom with a small office a few years before she passed. We can probably get it all sorted in a couple of hours. I won’t be a bother.”

“Doc, you are family. A distant cousin by blood and current wise elder by choice. We *want* you here. We’ll pack it all up, get you and your treasures settled, store the rest in one of the other spaces in the house, and you’ll be able to have it all near to hand if you need it. Myself and two of my closest friends will see that you are set up comfortably in no time,” Magnus said.

Dr. Eli squeezed Magnus’ hand, overcome with emotion.

“I hear you, Doc. We’ve got you. You’re safe now,” Magnus said.



After some thought and consideration for Dr. Eli's age and his ability to do a lot of narrow stairs, they ended up settling him in a couple of rooms on the first floor instead of the second. Everything was handled by Magnus, Bader, and their quietly rebellious team of friends. Soon Doc had a bedroom with his own bed and storage, and a sitting area with his desk and books. There was a fireplace heater, a cabinet that held an electric kettle and a mini fridge, as well as a private bath with a walk-in shower.

"This is almost as much space as I had in my little apartment," Doc said as he looked around in wonder.

"We left your books and decorations for you to unpack and decide where you wanted them to go. Magnus had wrapped your wedding photo in the bedding, so I put that out on the dresser where it had been before. That way Amelia will see for herself that you are taken care of," Bader said.

"I'll come help you hang things up when you're ready," Magnus said.

"Because your door opens into the break room area for the shop, you will want to keep your door locked when we get back to people being in the store – but for now, you don't have to worry about that," Bader said.

Dr. Eli hugged them both, then looked around the room once more. "If it's okay with the two of you, I'd like to rest a bit before dinner?"

"Of course," Magnus said. "We'll be across the way. Just come over when you're ready. I'll come knock when dinner's ready if we don't see you before."

"Thank you," Dr. Eli said and went into his bedroom as they left his suite.

"I feel a lot better about him being here," Bader said. "Did you see any signs of someone watching him?"

"I thought I saw someone, but I wasn't sure. Ian said he noticed a car parked across the lot from the apartment that followed us to the storage unit, then back here. Whoever it was now knows he's with us and not so easy a target."

“Good. I’m almost hoping they try something so I can squash them like a bug. How dare they threaten an old man like that?”

“Easy, love. We don’t need to draw attention, just circle the wagons and take care of our own.”

Bader hugged Magnus and sighed. “I’m so grateful we found each other. Magic, fate, luck, or divine plan, I’m just glad I’m in this with you.”

“I’ll second that,” Magnus said and kissed her.

CHAPTER TEN

Life adjusted and found a new routine with the addition of Dr. Eli to the household. Willoughby adopted him as his responsibility and spent much of his day sprawled near Doc's feet whether he was at his desk or out on the patio.

A week or more had passed when they were seated around the dinner table, enjoying berries and ice cream for dessert, when Doc said, "I had not realized how much I missed being around people on a daily basis. I feel mentally healthier and happier since joining your household. Thank you."

"We enjoy having you here too, Doc," Magnus said. "Being able to get help adjusting to these new skills is a blessing we didn't know we needed."

"Speaking of skills, you'll need to remember to lower the blinds in the shop before you go shuffling books around with your telekinetics, Bader. Someone might see you and we already know the violence that's happening out there," Doc said.

"You're right, but I had Mephistopheles in the window to warn me if anyone got close, and it was only for ten minutes at the most," Bader replied.

"Those of us who have lived with power most of our lives, have become adept at hiding it from non-magical beings. We've learned to be a step below paranoid

when it comes to making sure the blinds are down, curtains drawn, everything hidden. It's hard, at first, since most of us are usually going through puberty when it happens," Doc said.

"If both of my parents were skilled, why did I not develop around puberty as well?" Bader asked.

"Your parents hid their abilities and discouraged you as a child. As you got closer to puberty, they decided to bury your magic, to keep you safe. Henry's precognition told him that it would be dangerous for you to display skills. Everything your parents ever did was to keep you safe," Doc said.

Bader's attention was suddenly drawn to the doorway to the shop. A hazy figure appeared in front of the door, and she heard her father's voice say "*Bader, danger comes. Be careful, daughter.*"

"Dad?" Bader said.

Doc turned and his eyes widened. "Henry?"

"*Danger comes. Be careful.*"

He faded as quickly as he appeared, and Bader turned to Doc. "You saw him, right? I didn't just imagine my father's spirit telling me that danger is coming and I had to be careful?"

"I saw and heard him, yes," Doc said.

"I heard a murmur, but it was indistinct and I didn't see anything," Magnus said.

The buzzer on the shop's main door rang and Bader went to the control panel in the kitchen to see what the camera showed. A man in a dark suit and old fashioned hat stood at the door, head bowed so they could not see his face. Bader pressed the speaker button, "I'm sorry, we're closed."

"Ms. Winthrop, I need to speak to you. It's urgent," the man said.

"Again, I'm sorry, but we're closed. You're welcome to call the shop during business hours," Bader replied.

“This is a matter of life and death,” the man insisted. “You really don’t want to send me away.”

Doc came up beside her, peering at the screen. “That looks like Dr. Samuel Putnam. He taught American History at the university for a few years. May I?” Doc asked as he nodded to the speaker.

“Sure, but after being warned by a ghost, I’m not about to let him in,” Bader replied.

“Samuel, is that you?” Doc pressed the speaker. “What the hell do you want? We’re in the middle of dinner.”

“You know what I want, Eli. That child is no caretaker of that book, and neither are you. It belongs to me,” Samuel replied.

“Possession is nine tenths, Samuel, you know this. A letter from her mother also proves provenance. It’s hers. Not yours. Go away and leave them alone. Good night, Samuel,” Doc said.

“You’re making a mistake. All of you,” Samuel hissed. “This is not over.”

They didn’t say a thing, just watched as he glared up at the camera for a moment, then turned and stormed back down the walkway and got into his vehicle. It was an expensive, sleek, black automotive that pulled silently away down the road.

“That looks like the car Ian said was watching as we moved you in,” Magnus said. He’d joined them to watch the last few moments of the conversation, an arm around Bader.

“Our ice cream is melting,” Doc said. “Come sit, and I’ll tell you what I know about Samuel Putnam.”

They settled around the table and Doc sighed. “Once, we moved in the same circles. He was a regular at the Friday night socials your parents held. Only rarely were those at those gatherings magically unaware. Samuel prided himself on his skills and eventually took it upon himself to push your parents aside and

try to take over the gatherings. He was politely asked to stop attending. He tried to push his way back in and your father finally told him if he insisted on being a disruptive force, they would file a restraining order and he would not be allowed on the property.

“It didn’t seem to register with Putnam that he was not wanted, so they moved the gatherings to your family home. When he started to show up there, the meetings were moved to other member’s homes on different nights. Finally, they were stopped altogether because Putnam didn’t seem to be able to process that he was simply not welcome. He used his skills to grow his power and ran for local political office, bought and sold favors, and became the kind of person you didn’t want for an enemy. I have long thought he was behind the fire that killed your parents.”

“But Mr. Sudya confessed to the fires,” Bader said.

“I think Sudya was in the employ of Putnam,” Magnus said. “I have contacts in law enforcement and they said that Sudya mentioned, more than once, that he answered to his boss and he wouldn’t give them the man’s name.”

“That would not surprise me,” Doc said. “Samuel is known to employ those who don’t mind getting their hands dirty. But now he knows the book is here. He felt it, I’m sure, just as I did.”

“Do we have to worry about him trying the same thing with us as he did with my parents?” Bader asked.

“I can’t answer that,” Doc said.

“I can. He will likely try to steal the book and take us out, yes. Will it be a fire? Probably not, because then a pattern would have been established and Sudya’s confession would have them looking at anyone tied to him,” Magnus said. “I’m going to make a couple of phone calls, but Doc – you worked in finance. Don’t you have someone you could call and have them follow the

money? Bank transfers to Sudya's accounts from Samuel's would be a pretty clear trail."

"That's a good point," Doc said as he pulled out his phone. "Give me a minute to ask someone to check on that for us."

Bader closed her eyes and took a couple of calming breaths. "I'll stress about someone burning my house down until Putnam is stopped. I need to know we'll be okay." As she spoke, an image settled in her mind of the police taking a restrained Samuel Putnam into custody on her front lawn. She couldn't tell when it would happen, but she felt certain that it would.

"What just happened, Bader?" Doc said as he peered at her across the table.

"I just saw Putnam being restrained by the police on the front lawn. I can't tell *when* it is, but I'm confident it happens," Bader said.

"I felt it," Doc said. "That's a precognitive incident. If you close your eyes, focus your breathing, and think about Putnam, you should get more from around that moment. Maybe enough to tell the *when* of it."

Bader tried what he suggested. A few more images flashed across her mind and she smiled. "We're all safe when he's arrested."

"Now here's hoping that's the truth. The one thing about precog is that anything you do, or do not do, could influence the outcome. What you saw was just *one* possible outcome," Doc said. "It's the most *likely* outcome, but not guaranteed."

"And now we move into the realm of time travel and the issues with that," Magnus teased. "I contacted my friends, there will be a couple of discreet watchers in the area."

"Looks like there have been transactions between Sudya and Putnam," Doc said as he looked at his phone. "I'll send this info to you, Magnus. You can forward it on to your contacts?"

“Sure thing, Doc. Putnam doesn’t know who he’s messing with this time,” Doc said.

The evening wound down and Doc went to bed, but Bader couldn’t settle. She pulled the blinds in the shop, left the landscaping lights on, and kept watch from an upstairs window. Magnus joined her for a few minutes, but when he couldn’t convince her to go to bed, he left to get some sleep. Mischief stayed with Magnus while Mephistopheles joined her at the window and Willoughby stayed with Doc.

“You’re all watching over one of us. I appreciate that,” Bader said to Meph. “I know I seem ridiculous, but I have the strongest feeling that he’s going to come back tonight. My vision showed the landscaping lights and the sky still dark.”

“I’ll watch. You go get tea and use the bathroom. I’ll come get you if he shows up,” Mephistopheles said.

“Thanks, Mephie. I could use both. Be back as quick as I can,” Bader replied and hurried out of the room.

“Doc isn’t sleeping either,” Willoughby sent to Meph.

“Magnus is, but not well. He keeps waking. I don’t think any of them know about the baby, do they?” Mischief sent.

“No, not yet. They’ve got enough to worry about. We’ll tell them later,” Mephistopheles sent. *“It’s still early enough. Wait, wake them. I see Putnam’s car parking down the street.”*

“Bader’s on her way back up with her tea,” Mischief sent.

Bader came back into the room and Meph turned to look at her. *“Putnam’s car just parked down at the end of the street. No one’s got out of it yet.”*

“I was right,” Bader said. “I need to go wake Magnus.”

“Mischief can wake him. You should watch and wait, see what he does, if anything. Remember, precognition is one possibility.”

“I know, but this feels right,” Bader said. She sat back down and sipped at her tea, eyes on the car parked in the shadows at the end of the street.

“Hello, Bader. I know you’re watching,” Putnam sent to her. “Bring the book to me and I won’t hurt you or your loved ones. Make me come get it, and I make no promises.”

“You’re welcome to try, Samuel Putnam. You didn’t get it when Sudya tried, and you won’t get it now,” Bader replied.

“I see you’ve figured it out. Good. That means you’re intelligent enough to know I’m not playing games.”

“I’m not playing games either, Putnam. Go away and leave us be. My parents knew you were bad news and I trust their instincts.”

“Your parents were clueless as to what the Power we wield can bring to life. You’re even more clueless than they were. Killing you will be a mercy,” Putnam sent.

Bader hit a button on her phone and sent a text to Magnus to call his friends. She put her tea down and slowly made her way downstairs, then pulled up the blinds on the door and stood in the light so Putnam could see her. She could hear Magnus and Dr. Eli getting ready to join her yet kept her focus on Putnam as he got out of his vehicle and started to walk up the street.

“You are not welcome here, Samuel Putnam. If you step onto the grounds of my home, you will feel only pain,” Bader sent. She pressed her palms against the glass and waited. Somehow, she instinctively knew what to do. The minute he stepped onto the property, she called the roots of the shrubs to wrap around his legs and hold him in place.

He waved a hand and the roots snapped off, leaving rings around his ankles that no longer held him in place.

Bader softened the ground between the paving stones and he stumbled and fell to his knees. More roots wrapped his wrists and ankles. Putnam screamed in fury

while Bader smiled.

Magnus stepped up beside her and watched the old man struggle, then whispered to Bader, “When the cops come, best release that quickly.”

“Don’t worry, love. I’ve got this,” Bader replied. She drew her hands apart and watched Putnam land on his chest on the lawn and walkway, legs and arms spread wide as the roots and grasses held him in place. A car screeched to a halt in the middle of the street and two officers got out and approached Putnam where he lay on the ground. Before he could react, the roots slid back down underground.

“Don’t move. You’re under arrest for trespassing,” one said while the other pulled out the restraints and went to cuff Putnam.

“You can’t arrest me, I’ve done nothing wrong. I fell in this yard and couldn’t get up,” Putnam shouted.

Magnus opened the door and stepped out. “Thank you, gentlemen. This poor old man seems to be infected. He was ranting and screaming, then fell and didn’t seem able to get up. He said something about this being his home. I think he needs some serious medical care.”

“I’m not ill, I’m Samuel Putnam. Do you know who I am? I will have your badges. You can’t do this to me,” Putnam ranted as they put him in the back of their vehicle.

“I’ll come by tomorrow, Magnus, and get your statement. Take care, man,” one of the officers said.

“Appreciate the help, Pete,” Magnus replied.

They all went back inside and Bader hugged Magnus. “We’re going to be just fine. Thank you.”

“All of us are going to be fine. You, me, Doc, and junior,” Magnus said.

The animals started to argue.

“Mischief, you were supposed to wait. We were all supposed to tell them together,” Willoughby said.

“I’m the one that smelled the difference,” Mephistopheles added. *“I should have been the one to tell them.”*

“Wait, tell us what?” Bader asked.

All three animals – and Magnus – turned to her and said, “You’re pregnant.”

Doc just laughed and applauded from across the room. “Congratulations. Can we all try and get some sleep now?”

“I’m pregnant?” Bader said and looked at Magnus.

“We’re going to have a baby. Guess I need to finish buying that lot next door. We’re gonna need a bigger house,” Magnus said.

Bader just stared at Magnus and wondered how she’d managed to get so lucky. From being on her own, to one part of a whole that worked towards building a safe community.

Two ghosts in the corner of the room embraced.

Abby smiled. *“We’re going to be grandparents.”*

Henry nodded. *“It’s as I foresaw. Life will go on and justice has been served.”*

The End

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SAMPLE FROM TRIALS & TREATIES

Chapter One

Rew slid through the bushes, gave the street one more careful scan, then took a breath and phased themselves into the bookstore. They stumbled into a display table and slid down to the floor while the shakes took over. The magic was still rather new for Rew, and they'd not even been sure they could make it that far, but the current situation didn't give them a lot of options.

"You might want to crawl around here, behind the shelves," a voice said in Rew's head and they sucked in a breath, then turned to meet the gaze of a black and white tuxedo cat.

"Did you say something?" Rew finally whispered.

"Move your ass and get behind the bookcase!" the cat replied.

Rew scrambled to move and slid behind the shelves just as blue and red lights painted the front of the shop and streamed through the windows. A bright beam of white light shot through the glass door, highlighting the spot Rew had just been in. That beam moved across the shop space, then went dark as the officers moved away.

“You’re safe for now,” the cat said. “I’m Bard. You’re Rew. You need a shower, food, and a safe place to rest.”

“I need that Bader lady. I heard she could help,” Rew whispered. “Am I in the right place?”

“You are, and she’s on her way. Stay low and follow me,” Bard said and padded through the shop to the hallway that ran behind the main room.

Once out of the main space, Rew used the wall to get to their feet and leaned against the wall. “I need a minute. I’m still shaking.”

“You used a lot of power and you’ve not eaten in a while, yes? Magic takes fuel and...” Bard’s words stopped as Rew’s eyes rolled back in their head and they slid down the wall to tip over on the floor—out cold. *“We’ll discuss this later. I’ll get Bader,”* Bard said with a sigh and padded down the hall.

Bader had been awakened by Rocky nudging her hand where it draped over the side of the bed. *“Bader, get up. We’ve got company. Rew person needs you downstairs,”* Rocky said into her mind as she stirred.

“Rew person?” Bader asked as she sat up. “What’s a Rew person?”

“A person named Rew who is not awake in the hallway. Bard got them out of sight, but they need our help.”

“Oh, crap.” Bader leaned over and nudged her partner. “Magnus, get up. We’ve got company.”

She pulled on her sweat pants and grabbed a sweater, feet shoved into slippers before she ducked into the bathroom. Magnus was up and in jeans and a sweatshirt by the time she got out.

“Did Bard say how they got in?” Magnus asked Rocky, a mix of Staffordshire terrier and about six other things.

“Magic,” Rocky said.

“Got it,” Bader replied, and headed down the stairs and across the passage to the shop.

“Probably mage-shock,” Magnus said. “I’ll bring them into the safe room, you get the tea.”

The couple found a bedraggled figure sprawled on the floor between the shop and the break room. A tangle of arms and legs, the person had short, curly hair and dusky skin streaked with dirt and blood. To add to the puzzle, Rew was skinny and wrapped in clothes that had once been nice, but now bore tears and marks of a long struggle.

Magnus crouched down to see if the figure would awaken and choked on the stench. “First thing is a shower and clean clothes,” he said to Bader.

“After the tea, or the poor thing won’t be able to stand long enough to shower. Get them up and on the couch. I’ll put an old blanket down first,” Bader said and went to do just that.

Magnus waved the smelling salts under Rew’s nose. A choked gasp, a soft panicked cry, and Rew scrambled into a corner of the sofa, hugging their knees and staring with wide green eyes at the two in front of them.

“Hey, you’re safe. I’m Magnus and this is Bader,” Magnus said. “We know you’re Rew – the animals told us.”

“Here, you need to drink this. It’s an herbal tea with a lot of honey. Helps with mage-shock,” Bader said as she handed Rew the mug. “It’s cooled some.”

Rew accepted the mug with hands that visibly shook. They took a sip, then another, then drained the mug. “Wasn’t bad,” Rew said. “Thank you.”

“What brought you here, Rew?” Bader asked, her tone gentle.

“It’s a really long story. A friend of a friend told me I’d be safe with you. Is that true?” Rew asked.

Bader and Magnus looked at each other, then back to their visitor.

“I’m betting Detective Jessup sent them our way,” Magnus sent to his wife.

“I won’t take that bet. Jessup and Collins both have been really good at protecting the magi,” Bader replied.

“It’s true,” Bader said. “But there are rules. This is a safe room. The bathroom is over there. I’ll find you some clean clothes and you can shower. Magnus will make some food and we’ll talk as we eat. You’ll have to stay in here until we figure out who’s after you. The room is shielded, so people can’t scan it with magic or tech.”

“If it’s shielded, then I can’t pop in or out, either. That’s good,” Rew said with a sigh. “I’d really like a shower and something clean to wear. Food, too, but clean first.”

“Let me grab you some things, and a bag to toss those into. We’ll make sure you have street clothes and such before you go, but for now, let’s toss those things and get you settled,” Bader said.

“One last question before I go get us food,” Magnus asked. “How did you get into the shop? It has biometric scanners and reinforced windows, doors, and the outside walls.”

“I just ported in,” Rew said.

“Ported? As in, teleported?” Magnus asked.

“Yeah. Knocked me on my ass though. I thought it was because of how far, but if it was reinforced, that’d explain it too. I haven’t been doing it long, so I don’t know,” Rew replied. “I’m sorry I just showed up, but the SaHPs were following me.”

“Saps?” Bader asked.

“Sword and Hammer Patrols. SaHPs. They have patrol cars with their weird logo on the doors and blue-red flasher bars and everything.”

“I thought they were a private security company for the Country Club set?” Bader said, as she went through the cabinets and pulled out clothes. Drawstring pants, a sweatshirt, t-shirt, shorts, and socks were piled up and handed to Rew along with a trash bag.

“They were. Sort of. They’re not just that now,” Rew said as they took the things and offered a soft “thank you” before they ducked into the bathroom and locked the door.

Magnus gave Bader a look, then shook his head and sighed. “We need to find out what’s going on, but first, food.”

“I’ll make up the bed in here for Rew and get the folding table out. I don’t want to leave them alone in case they collapse again,” Bader said.

“Good point. Make yourself a coffee. I’ll be a while,” Magnus said as he kissed her forehead and left the room.

The room was about twelve feet square with three doors in the walls. One led out to the hallway, one into the bathroom, and one to a large closet. The room used to be storage, but shortly after Magnus had moved in, they had found they needed a space safe from magical and technical spies or intrusions. Doc had helped them with the shielding of iron sheets etched with runes and sigils, and the space was as safe and comfortable as they could make it. Rew would be one of many who had found shelter within these walls.

By the time Magnus had pushed the cart loaded with eggs, pancakes, toast, bacon, juice and milk into the room, the shower had stopped, but Rew was still inside.

“Rew, are you okay?” Bader asked at the door.

“Yeah, I’m almost done,” Rew called back.

“Food’s here,” Magnus said.

The door popped open and Rew gave them a tentative smile. “Did I hear you say food?”

Bader chuckled and pointed to a seat at the table. “Go sit. I’ll clean up...”

Rew shook their head. “No need. I cleaned up. The trash bag is just inside the door, the towels are folded on top as they’ll need washing. I wiped everything down, too.”

“Thank you,” Bader said. “Let’s eat.”

Rew was clearly hesitant about helping themselves, so Magnus started to load up a plate and handed it over.

Bader took some scrambled eggs and toast, and a fresh cup of coffee. They watched as Rew struggled to maintain manners when they’d obviously not had a solid meal in a while.

“Just eat, Rew. Once you take the edge off, we can talk,” Magnus said.

The first plate was emptied, along with two glasses of milk, before Rew slowed down enough to speak *and* eat.

“Jessup told me I’d be safe with you. He wasn’t kidding, was he?” Rew asked.

“No, he wasn’t kidding, but when did he tell you that? He usually gives us a heads-up when someone’s on their way,” Magnus said.

“About two this morning,” Rew replied. “We were over at the Spruce Street shelter. A couple of the druggies had got into a fight and one got killed. I’d missed my chance at a bed, so I was in a box out back. Jessup was looking for one of the weapons and found me. I ‘ported a few feet away and he ended up telling me about you. Said I’d be safe here. I haven’t been safe in a long time, so I really need to know.”

“Detectives Jessup and Collins are friends, and they know we are magi and that we help those who need it. Unless you attack us, you are considered a guest and protected,” Bader said. “This may be my business, but it is also our home.”

Rew looked horrified. “I’d never attack anyone. Never.” They played with the fork for a moment, then put it down and leaned back. “My name is Rewell Morgan and I’m nineteen years old. My mom couldn’t handle it when my magic showed up last year, and three months ago, I ran to avoid being killed. I’m not being dramatic – she shot at me with a laser pistol. Morgan Martin is a guard at the state penitentiary, so they’re allowed to be armed.”

They lifted up the sweatshirt and t-shirt to show a dark pink scar that ran across their lower ribs on the right. “Grazed me, but it bled like crazy. I ran and hid, then ported four times in a row to get further away without leaving a trail. After that, I went to a couple of friends’ places, but she pressured everyone we knew to turn me in. She told them all I’d attacked her and threatened to kill her in her sleep. The only one that didn’t believe her was my friend, Ingrid.”

Bader took a sip of her coffee, her eyes on Rew the whole time. Magnus had leaned back to not appear intimidating. He was a large, muscular man with dark brown skin, light brown eyes, and a close-shaved head. A professor at the local university, he was used to dealing with a wide variety of situations, from large classes of literature scholars to campus events that needed extra security. Magnus knew he could be frightening, so he used his body language to project safety and calm.

“Ingrid patched me up and gave me a place to stay for a few days. The SaHPs busted through her door and I ported out into the next apartment, then out of the building, and ran. I went back later, after I was sure they had left, and found Ingrid’s body in the middle of her living room floor. They had beaten her to death. I grabbed my things, and a few of hers, and left again. She was killed because of me.”

“No, Rew. She was killed because some asshole was on a power trip, and because your mother let her fear rule her,” Bader said. “That’s not on you. No more than it’d be on you if something happened to us for sheltering you here.” She raised her hand. “Not that I think that will happen. You’re not the first, nor will you be the last, that we shelter here. Just know that you are safe. We’ll clean this up and let you get some rest. There is food in that cabinet, and sandwich fixings in the mini fridge, along with cold drinks and water. Tea, coffee, and soup on top of that cabinet there. Eat what you want when you want. There’s a speaker system in the house. If you hit that button, it’ll either buzz the main

house, or my phone. Buzz when you're awake, and I'll come back and we can talk some more."

Rew gave a nod, then scooped some bacon and eggs into toast and made a sandwich, took their juice and moved out of the way. "I'll just finish this, then sleep. Thank you again, for everything."

"You're most welcome, Rew," Magnus said as he helped Bader load up the cart and pushed it out the door. "Just remember, don't leave the room. Buzz us. Your safety, and ours, depends on it."

"I've got it. Don't worry, I'm not planning on going anywhere but to sleep," Rew replied.

"Rest well," Bader said as they closed the door behind them. "Do we need to lock it?" she asked Magnus once they were in the hallway.

"No, I think Rew is grateful for the safety. Come on, you've got a business to run and I've got a virtual class to teach in about two hours," Magnus replied. "Showers and more coffee so we don't fall asleep before lunch?"

"Definitely," Bader replied with a laugh. "Showers *of* coffee might be better."

For all their joking, the two of them knew they were in the deep end once more. Rew was safe, but for how long, and how much impact would this have on them?



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T.K. Eldridge retired from a career in Intelligence for the US Gov't to write. The experiences from then are now being used to feed the muse for paranormal romance, mysteries, supernatural, and urban fantasy stories. When they're not writing, they are enjoying life in the Blue Ridge mountains of western North Carolina. Two dogs, a garden, a craft hobby and a love of Celtic Traditional music keep them from spending too much time at the computer.

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