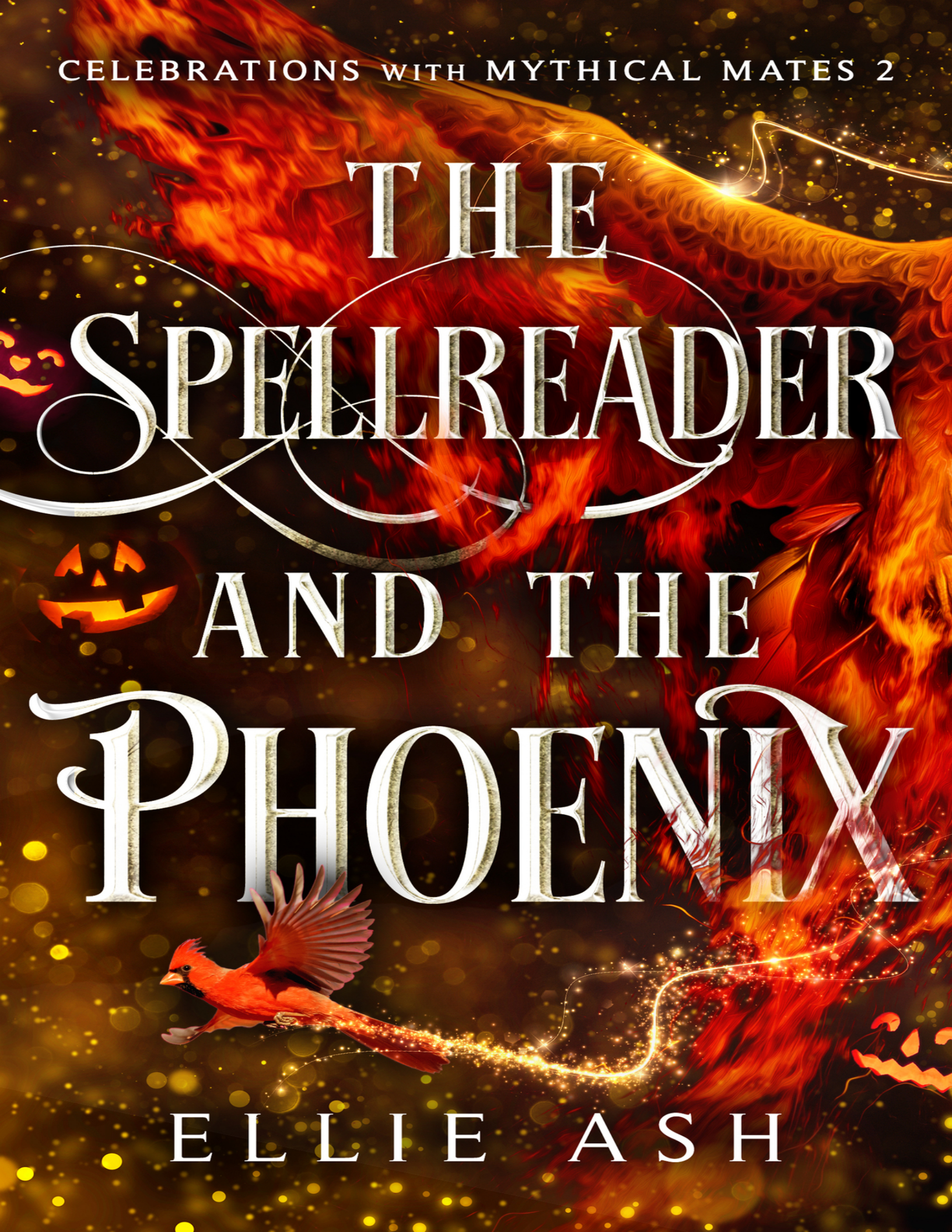
CELEBRATIONS WITH MYTHICAL MATES 2

THE SPELLREADER AND THE PHOENIX



ELLIE ASH

CELEBRATIONS WITH MYTHICAL MATES 2

THE SPELLREADER AND THE PHOENIX

ELLIE ASH

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About The Spellreader and the Phoenix

Celebrations with Mythical Mates 2

Can a happily ever after start with an accident?

Max

Owning a bookshop would be perfect if only it didn't involve customers. As a witch who's also a rare Spellreader, Max can find the spells that other witches need, as long as they're not so rude that he hangs up on them. This keeps his store afloat, and his life follows a predictable pattern, just the way he likes it, until Rory crashes—literally—into his life. Max has never met anyone like this cheerful shifter, and he doesn't know quite what to do with him, but he's also… intrigued.

Rory

Rory's spent the last ten years—he's pretty sure it's not more than ten years! —in his bird form. He takes life as it comes, and he's happy flying place to place as he waits to find his mate. When his excitement at finally spotting the man leads to him crashing right into his mate's window, he seizes the opportunity to get to know him. Together, Rory's certain there's nothing

they can’t do… if he can convince his grumpy mate that they’re meant to be together.

The Spellreader and the Phoenix is a 110K MM urban fantasy romance novel. It features a grumpy demi bookshop owner who can read any spell ever written, and a sunshine phoenix who’s never met a person he doesn’t like. It’s low-angst and low-spice. It can be read as a standalone, but for full continuity, the series should be read in order.

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Content Warnings

Please be aware of the following content, which may be upsetting to some readers. Spoilers are possible:

- Past death of parents from a car accident (referenced)
- Serious injury (non-fatal, non-graphic) to an MC during a robbery
- Character being reborn (they're a phoenix!)

If you would like further details, feel free to reach out to me at ellie@ellieashauthor.com.

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Author's Note

Thank you for choosing to read this book. No generative AI has been used in its creation. It was written by a human (me!), edited by humans, and human artists designed and created the cover.

Although it has been carefully edited, typos are pretty sneaky, and occasionally a few still make it through to the final version. If you notice any errors, feel free to email me at ellie@ellieashauthor.com so they can be corrected. Enjoy!

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In memory of Charlotte, the kitty who tried determinedly for almost a decade to trip me going down the stairs as she darted beneath my feet, blithely convinced that her getting there faster meant she'd get fed faster.

For my D&D crew, who've provided inspiration, wild adventures, and so many laughs over the last three years.

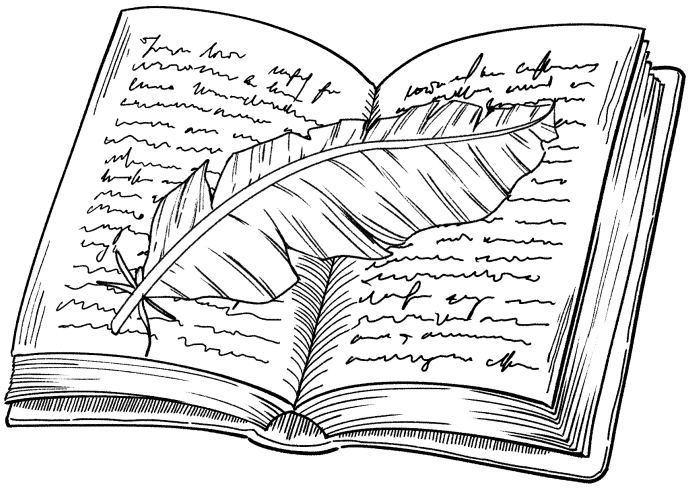
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Chapter One

Max

"The problem with a job in customer service is the customers," Max grumbled to Nōwē as he watched the annoying man stalk out of his shop, nearly slamming the door and setting the attached bell jangling violently.

Max hated that bell, but it turned out that not being aware when customers entered his shop was actually worse. Max had a habit of getting distracted, and the bell was essential.

If only there were a way to own a bookshop and not have to deal with *people*.

Nōwē didn't have anything to say about Max's profound observation, just flicked her ears and continued to stare judgmentally from her position in the window, catching the late afternoon sun. Some people had told him that shop cats were supposed to be friendly, and Max then gave *them* his best judgmental stare. (It was pretty good, but Nōwē was a master.)

Nōwē liked pets on her own terms, and strangers trying to grab her was generally *not* her terms. (She made the occasional exception for small children, but even that wasn't universal, and Max had long ago recognized that he would never be able to fully grasp the multitudes of his feline companion.)

"Just because I work in customer service doesn't mean it's alright to be rude to me."

Max was extremely capable of being rude, but he *did* try not to take out his feelings on unsuspecting strangers unprovoked. The person who served him coffee or answered the phone at City Hall were just doing their jobs, and Max had come to accept that a certain amount of human interaction was necessary in order to function in the world.

Some people apparently hadn't learned that lesson, or seemed to genuinely believe that anyone in the service industry was there to serve them, full stop. Which was ludicrous. Business practices, logic, and basic tenets of human decency came into play before "the customer is always right."

"Whoever came up with that saying should be *shot*," Max griped.

Nōwē's tail lashed, but she turned her head back to the sun and closed her eyes. Apparently, she didn't think much of Max's grumbles. She was probably inured.

Max sighed and went back to quietly muttering about fools who didn't understand that second-hand bookshops dealt in second-hand books. No, Max didn't have a copy of the most recent bestseller the man wanted.

Max preferred his words to have been written in a different century, generally speaking. (There were exceptions. He had a whole shelf of queer indie authors because representation mattered.) But if you could find it in a drugstore or big chain, it probably wasn't going to be in Max's store.

His sister, Evie, regularly told him that he would probably make a better profit if he tried catering to what the general population actually wanted. Max didn't care about that. He enjoyed hunting for obscure books that someone desperately wanted. He liked having affordable options for that kid who loved reading and wanted something that wasn't available in their local library. He had a little "by donation and free for kids" table up at the front with items that he acquired and didn't feel that he could usefully sell. So even if someone was really stuck, they could always get a book.

He made most of his money thanks to his back room. Normal people might get second-hand gems and the occasional antiquarian book, but witches got obscure spellbooks and the exact spell they were searching for.

His phone rang, and with a sigh, Max picked it up. "Read for a Spell. Max speaking."

His mother had thought she was so hilarious. She'd been big on the idea of hiding in plain sight, which was why they had a bookshop that catered to normal people *and* witches. With puns about the word *spell*.

“I need a spell! It’s urgent!” The words were practically screeched.

Max rolled his eyes, since there was no customer in front of him to complain. Where had common courtesy gone? Was he everyone’s lackey today?

Max tried to school his tone to basically polite. “Why don’t you tell me exactly what you’re looking for, and I’ll see what I can do.”

The frantic caller told him all about the spell they needed to regrow cut plants. There’d apparently been a lawnmower incident, and it was critical that the plants be fixed. Max was definitely charging extra for foolishness, but the witch assured him she’d pay whatever it cost, could he just be *quick*.

After he hung up, Max headed into the back. He passed through the first beaded curtain into the hallway which led to the back door of the shop. There were stairs on the left, one set going down to the basement and the other leading up to Max’s apartment. On the right was a storage closet near the back door, a tiny bathroom (which was technically for staff but effectively for anyone who really needed it), and closest to the front, Max’s back room, where the magic happened (literally, in some cases).

Although it looked on this side like the back room was separated from the store solely by another beaded curtain, there were plenty of protections on it. No one could get in without Max’s invitation. Sound was muffled, so people outside couldn’t easily hear what he was doing, and he wasn’t bothered by anyone in the shop. (He’d quickly undone the charm that had muffled sound completely, since it turned out he needed to be at least a little aware of his customers.)

If he had his way, he’d spend all his time in the back room—except sometimes witches were entitled jerks, and it was nice to ensure normal kids found the books they needed. If only he could trust people to just leave him money without his ever needing to interact with them…

Since Max hadn’t yet found a spell that could make that happen, he split his time between normal humans and witches who were typically seeking specific spells. Occasionally, they wanted whole spellbooks or to study a specific type of spell. But most often, they were seeking a spell to serve a specific purpose, and they were always hopeful that Max could find the spell they needed already in existence.

Unlike Spellsmiths who could *create* a custom spell, Max could read what an existing recorded spell did—a special talent a select few were born with, because spells weren’t written in a language. No one could parse the

drawing of a Spellsmith and figure out how to divvy up its components to make a new spell. (Many had tried over the years. It generally resulted in disaster.) Despite the fact that it didn't entirely make sense, Spell*readers* could look at that drawing full of interconnected lines and know exactly what it would do when a witch sketched it out and powered it with magic.

Spellsmiths and Spellreaders didn't always get along. Part of this was due to the fact that the Spellsmith family was a bunch of entitled, stuck-up jerks. (Yes, they'd taken the last name "Spellsmith." They acted like it were a *title*. Enough said.) Spellsmiths tended to look down on a Spellreader's ability, claiming that it served no useful purpose. Spellreaders tended to keep Spellsmiths on the straight and narrow, reviewing spells and confirming if they actually did what they were supposed to do. If you were an unscrupulous Spellsmith, you definitely didn't want a Spellreader nearby.

Spellsmiths also tended to charge exorbitant fees for their services, whereas Max was much more reasonable. Depending on how hard it was to find what someone was looking for, it could be pricey, but he wasn't outrageous. He also used a sliding scale that ensured he could still help people who didn't have abundant funds. (And there was absolutely an asshole charge for people who had money and were jerks.) He had an excellent record—and memory—of the spells that he'd found and catalogued over the years, so he could usually answer a customer quickly. If it was within his repertoire, he was going to be reasonable about the price, unless someone really pissed him off.

Max was always looking for new spells. He kept his eye out for witch estate sales, or sometimes family members brought in books they didn't need anymore. Occasionally, a normal family sold off books they didn't realize the importance of. The World Spell was responsible for ensuring that witches and shifters didn't come to the notice of normal people, and while it had been struggling for years to keep up with the advances in technology, it was still doing its job. Those normal people thought the books were junk or nonsense, or somehow never quite got around to looking at them carefully.

The World Spell didn't make them forget, precisely, but it helped them… not notice or not retain anything magical. It was so complex and so vast that Max couldn't really conceive of what the Spell must have looked like when the Spellsmiths created it.

Spells were sketched with a witch's finger—only one for simple spells, two or three as they got more complex. They started small, maybe the size of a teacup saucer. He'd seen spells that were the size of a dinner plate, and the occasional very ambitious tire-sized, but that was the extent of it. Trying to envision a spell like the World Spell actually being *drawn* by someone… Would it be the size of a football field? How could anyone sketch that?

No one had ever figured it out. The Spell had been in place for centuries—no one knew exactly how long—and remained a mystery.

Thankfully, Max wasn't looking for anything nearly so esoteric today. He scanned through his collection and tugged down a couple of likely options. (Two were ornate, leather-bound tomes, and one looked like it was an exercise book from an elementary school twenty years ago. There was no saying where witches would choose to preserve their spells.) He flipped through them, scanning the drawings. The witch didn't want indiscriminate growing. She wanted a *restoration*, if that could be managed. She'd said the accident had just occurred, so it was likely the plants would remember how they'd been such a short time ago, and that meant—

Ah, yes, here it was. Minor restoration of plant life to their optimal form within twenty-four hours. As long as they'd been healthy when the accident occurred, this should work just fine.

He took a photo of the spell because technology had made things a lot easier in some ways, although they all still practiced drawing spells constantly. They had to replicate them in order to actually *cast* them, after all. But this way, no customer could accuse Max of not faithfully reproducing the spell if it didn't work the way they wanted. (Because of course those people blamed Max rather than admitting they might have made an error or not asked for the right thing. Customers were the worst.)

The door chimed just as Max emerged from the back room—which always looked dim and showed an innocuous view of vague shelves of totally ordinary books through the beads—and he spent the next twenty minutes guiding the enthusiastic young girl with her witch parent around the store, trying to find the perfect birthday present for a child he'd never met.

It was difficult to be very helpful, but he had to give the child points for wanting to give a book and wanting to pay for it with her very own money.

They wound up with a book on spelunking, a YA novel, and a cozy mystery. Max still had no idea what the birthday child actually liked to read,

but maybe their tastes were broad.

“Thank you, Mr. Max!” the girl chirped happily as she skipped out of the shop.

Max inclined his head. At least he’d seen one customer with manners today.

There were some witches and shifters who frequented his shop in person, like this enthusiastic young reader’s parent, recognizable by the “buzz” of magic that he sensed from them. Usually, a stronger sensation of magic meant someone was a witch, while a weaker one meant they were a shifter. Children never felt magical until they either developed magic, usually late in puberty, or it eventually became evident that they were a normal person.

Since many normal people frequented the shop along with the smaller percentage of witches and shifters, they didn’t usually give Max more than a nod of understanding, but that was enough. (He didn’t want to have conversations with anyone, after all, but he did want witches and shifters to know that they were in a safe space.)

Once the shop was empty, Max called the witch back and went through the arduous process of explaining why she had to pay him *before* he would send the photo of the spell.

“Don’t you understand this is *urgent*?” the witch demanded, her voice getting rather shrill.

“Don’t you understand that you could already have the spell by now if you’d stop arguing and simply pay me?” Max countered.

The witch sucked in a breath. “Why, I never!”

Max was not in the mood. “Would you like the spell or not?”

“This is not acceptable behavior!”

“I assure you that it’s quite standard to want payment before delivering goods,” Max said with forced patience. “It’s how commerce has functioned for centuries.”

Because everyone knew it was harder to get payment from someone once they’d already consumed your service and didn’t need you anymore.

“I will not be using you again!” the witch huffed.

“That’s your choice,” Max said, because they both knew that if she desperately needed a spell again, there was every chance she’d call back.

The thing about witches was that they remained old-fashioned in some key ways. Spells most often got passed down through families. There were some specialist schools for classes of spells like healing. There was some

sharing amongst friends and colleagues, especially amongst the younger generation. But there wasn't a public institution where you could find the spells you wanted. That left people relying on witches like Max for a paid service. As a Spellreader, he could guarantee a spell did what it was labeled to do. Other witches could only rely on labels, and through accident or design, that could go awry.

The annoyed witch finally gave up and did what they'd both known she was going to do this entire time: she paid him, so he could send her the spell she wanted so badly.

Max hung up the phone with another eye roll.

"She could have been out there fixing all the destroyed plants ten minutes ago if she'd just stopped complaining," Max told Nōwē.

Nōwē was supremely uninterested in the witch's issues, which was fair. The woman was very uninteresting, and Max intended to cast her from his mind and never think about her again.

Mondays were one of his quietest days. He made a few more normal person sales and was able to spend a couple hours—in intervals—in the back room, continuing to catalogue spells.

Witches could be very secretive. It was a sensible way of life to ensure that normal people didn't find out about them, panic, and try to kill them, experiment upon them, or subjugate them. It was how they survived. But then there were the *unhelpful* forms of secrecy, like not labeling their spells, or labeling them in code, or shifting the spell labels over by one (or seven).

Max sighed and set about correcting yet another set of labels in one of his recently acquired spellbooks. There were those who thought he was a fool for what he was doing, making sure that spells could be read by anyone. He supposed that if he were trying to get rich or make himself indispensable, then he wasn't making the best choice.

All Max was trying to do was make spells accessible and prevent accidents. Every witch was better served by knowing what every spell did. Keeping spells hoarded in family lines was foolish. Relying on Spellsmiths to create new, expensive spells every time was asinine. The only sensible thing to do was make spells available for everyone.

In his perfect world, Max would have an accessible repository of spells, and people could take the ones they needed. Sort of like a free digital library. But he spent most of his time finding and labeling spells. And while he and technology got along… adequately, he suspected that wasn't enough

to meet the needs of a project like that. (He also needed to get paid somehow so that he had time to keep finding and labeling spells.)

So it was on the back burner, and Max concentrated on deciphering spells and growing his collection. There was always something new to find, and he loved that part, working out what a spell did and figuring out whether it was something he already had recorded. Family spellbooks typically listed all the spells the family could need, and there were numerous common spells that everyone had in their repertoire.

But there were also specialist books, or just someone who was really interested in spells relating to water or stasis or healing or mushrooms. (Max couldn't truthfully say that he didn't judge, but he *did* understand quirky interests.) Magic could do a lot, and so there were a lot of spells in existence.

Many books of spells had burned with the Library of Alexandria. Max was still salty about that. He was pretty sure it was the last time anyone had tried his idea of cataloguing and actually making spells available to all. But surely, they had better technology now. There were ways to ensure that there were backups and that all the information was easily available to all witches. Max didn't want to gatekeep if they could come up with a good, safe way to share.

For now, though, he just kept doing what he was doing. He didn't have the bandwidth to rewrite the way that witches related to spells. He just liked to point out when people were being fools—which was most of the time.

When 5pm rolled around, he flipped the open sign to closed and locked the door before shutting off the lights. It was always a relief when he got to do that. Still, Sundays and Mondays he was only open from 11 to 5, so he shouldn't complain. It was a smaller window for customers to be obnoxious than the other days of the week.

"I'm just going to work in the back room for a little while," Max told Nōwē.

She yowled, reminding Max that he'd promised to feed her—and himself—before he got lost in books again.

"Fine," he grumbled. "Come on."

He ducked into the back hallway and around to the stairs that led up to his apartment above the bookshop. Nōwē twined around his ankles and tried to kill him as they headed up the stairs.

“You know,” he reminded her, “if you trip me and I fall and break my neck, I can’t feed you.”

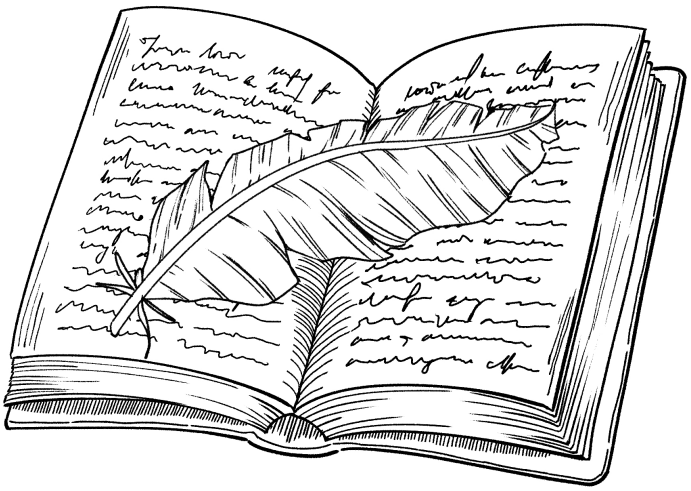
She meowed some more and continued to dart around his feet. Sometimes, he was relieved she wasn’t his familiar. Of course, if she were his familiar, she probably wouldn’t want to kill him. But in case he was wrong, he definitely didn’t need to feel her assurance that if she killed him, she’d eat his eyeballs and feast on his flesh so she’d be totally fine.

“A dead body doesn’t last that long,” he grumbled. “I feed you over and over every day. You should be grateful for this deal.”

When he unlocked the door, she darted inside and headed for the kitchen, like getting there before him would somehow get her fed sooner. Rolling his eyes, Max prepared her meal—wet food, because he was a sucker—and made himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich because anything else felt like too much work.

With impeccable timing, his sister Evie texted.

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Chapter Two

Max

Most annoying sibling in the entire world

Did you remember to eat today?

She was *seven* years younger than he was. When their parents had been killed in a car accident when he was 24 and she was 17, he'd taken care of her. Unfortunately, she seemed to have decided that meant it was now her job to take care of him.

Max

Yes. I'm an adult.

Most annoying sibling in the entire world

Jelly doesn't count as a fruit or vegetable.

Unfortunately, she knew him well.

Max

That's one of the joys of adulthood. You don't have to follow a nutritious meal plan if you don't want to.

Don't you work in a bakery?

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

LOL True. And we do eat our fair share of sweets. I keep thinking that Adam couldn't possibly make something more delicious, and then he does. Every time.

Which you would know, if you ever came to visit.

MAX

I can't leave the shop.

He'd taken over the bookshop when their parents died, and he couldn't imagine doing anything else. (Unless he had a breakthrough and figured out how to eliminate customers from the equation.)

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

Then do what normal people do and get some help.

That… was indeed what normal people did. Max and Evie had helped in the store growing up. When their parents died, they'd had a life insurance policy that had gotten Evie through therapy and school, and there'd been just enough leftover that Max had a bit of a cushion to make mistakes and figure out how to run the store on his own in those early years.

Max had poured all his focus into making sure the shop continued to succeed. He definitely didn't have his mother's customer service skills when it came to Spellreading, but he'd figured out early that there was no way he could pretend to be something he wasn't. His real personality was going to shine through, and he'd rather ensure that people knew what to expect from the beginning.

Evie had been nagging him for ages to hire some help, pointing out how the bakery she worked at had even hired a part-time baker to start learning from Adam, the maker of the best desserts ever.

MAX

I'll think about it.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

If you haven’t hired someone by the time I come visit you, I’m going to take matters into my own hands!

MAX

I said I’ll think about it.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

And I know what you mean when you say that.

Yeah, so Max hadn’t really been planning to hire anyone, dammit. And the problem with Evie was that she probably meant it. Thankfully, it was only mid-September; he had several months until her post-Christmas visit. He could come up with a plan by then. Probably.

MAX

I have to go.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

[eye roll emoji] I’m right, and you know it. Don’t spend all night reading spells.

MAX

Go annoy some of your customers instead of me.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

[tongue stuck out emoji]

Max realized that he was smiling. Even though she really was incredibly annoying, Max loved his sister. He was glad that she was flourishing in California. Losing her parents as young as she had definitely hadn’t done her any favors, but she was persevering.

She was his exact opposite in many ways, and she’d gone to university for Hospitality. She handled most of the bakery’s corporate events and catering. For some inexplicable reason, she loved people.

She’d figured out where she belonged.

Max’s brow furrowed. He’d figured out where he belonged, too, he just hadn’t figured out how to eliminate everyone *else*.

That part had been easier when Evie was here and had happily sat up front and chatted with every person who came through the door.

But Max would never want to drag her back here when her dreams lay elsewhere. It was just… he couldn’t quite imagine hiring someone else. Yes, the shop was doing well enough that he could afford it, thanks to the money he made as a Spellreader. But given the back room and all the work he did for witches, he needed to hire a witch. No way could he hide everything from a normal human. It would be exhausting and doomed to failure.

And he didn’t know any witches who might be suited to the job. (He knew Evie would tell him to advertise for the position and conduct interviews and such, but the idea made him shudder.)

And, of course, there was the inescapable reality that if he hired someone else, someone else would work here with him.

He liked his space just as it was.

“We’re good like this, aren’t we, Nōwē?”

She’d scarfed down all the food in her bowl and looked like she was considering whether she could shake him down for more.

He scooped her into his arms and cuddled her for the three point four seconds that she allowed before she meowed and leaped to the ground.

Yeah, they were good like this.

“I’ll only spend a little while with the books,” Max told her.

She eyed him with patent scorn and disbelief.



The next few days passed in the expected routine. Max ran on his treadmill in the morning. He listened to audiobooks, ignored people, and burned enough energy that he could mostly eat what he wanted, no matter what Evie said about optimal nutrition. He’d never quite understood people’s obsession with

bodies looking a certain way or wanting other people to look at them or wanting to look at other people.

Max wanted his clothing to continue to fit so that he didn't have to buy more. Jeans and graphic tees with puns or geeky connections were his speed, and he didn't want to have to change that.

He then spent as much time cataloguing spells as he could. He bid on a couple of online auctions that looked promising. He dealt with customers when he absolutely had to, and he wasn't shy about telling the rude ones where they could stuff it. He drove out a couple of horny teens who decided that late-night Thursday meant the bookshop was a place to try to make out.

People were so gross. Max didn't understand them at all. Well, except for the ones that he *did* understand.

Since the beginning of September, a kid spent most evenings curled up in one of the comfy chairs. (They were still there because Max hadn't been able to bring himself to change them from his parents' setup, even though it encouraged people to stay and lounge instead of getting out.) They looked like they were about sixteen or so, were built like a football player, hunched their shoulders a lot, had long dark hair, warm light brown skin, and sometimes wore lip gloss, bright nail polish, and flowy clothing. Max had once caught the yellow, white, purple, and black stripes of a non-binary flag pin on their jacket.

The public school system hadn't been particularly kind to Max. Coming from a witch family, he'd needed to hide a lot about his upbringing. Add in being introverted and geeky on top of that, and it hadn't been a great time. But he'd been a cis white male. While this kid didn't have a buzz indicating they were a witch or a shifter, Max worried they weren't having an easy time, either.

They were quiet, didn't leave a mess, and clearly needed a safe space. Max had already made sure his queer section had several books on being non-binary, queer, and questioning. Then Max left them alone, because the last thing he'd wanted when he was their age was for someone to ask him if he was alright or try to butt into his business. If they weren't causing a problem, they could stay as long as they wanted.

Thursdays and Fridays, the shop stayed open until eight, and on Fridays Max hosted a D&D session. He wasn't the DM—thank the gods—but without quite understanding how it had happened, he'd become part of the group instead of just letting them use the space in the basement. (It was finished, but not, like, *nice* or anything, but Stella said that just added to the

dungeon vibe. Max had realized at that point that it was like arguing with his sister, and he was never going to win.)

They all brought snacks on the understanding that they would never eat them with the books upstairs and they would clean up after themselves, because Nōwē didn't need an increased rodent population, she was managing just fine, thank you very much.

Half the room was taken up with stacks of boxes that Max was slowly working his way through, because there were simply not enough hours in the day. But there was still plenty of room to play, and Max had acquired the long table on one of those "free stuff" sites. (It had made more sense than constantly having to set up and take down card tables and having dice get cocked on the uneven surface between them. Plus, no one wanted to remember the "didn't check to make sure the legs were locked into place" debacle.)

Max had been pulled in as the unlikely sixth player. He'd read the player's handbook cover to cover when he realized there was no getting out of this. He played a surly wizard, which meant he didn't have to act all that much, and that helped. These were all normal people, no magic buzz along Max's skin indicating that they were either witches or shifters. But in the context of the game, Max could say whatever magical thing he wanted, and it didn't matter.

It was oddly freeing.

They all greeted him cheerfully as they trooped in, and within a few chaotic minutes, they were all set up.

"Alright," Stella said from the head of the table. "Where were we?"

"I was about to seduce the dragon," Edward reminded everyone, flashing his most charming smile.

He was their human rogue, and he was a fool. His real-life dating tended to have the same energy and disastrous consequences.

"I'm ready to rage," Sam, their barbarian, told them. She rolled her eyes at Edward. "For when everything goes wrong."

Max had packed Hold Monster, but at the time, it hadn't been so that his teammates could make asinine choices. Tom and David looked like they were expecting everything to go wrong.

"Okay," Stella said, her grin promising all sorts of problems to them. "Here we go…"



Sunday, Max only had to work 11 to 5. It was usually the day where he did laundry and ran errands in the morning. He actually left the building… largely because Evie insisted it was important to do that.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

You're so pasty.

MAX

Not all of us live in the land of sunshine and kale.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

LOL You're not wrong. But seriously, Max, it's important to see the sun sometimes.

MAX

I'm not a plant.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

You're not a vampire, either. Get outside before I hire a singing telegram to follow you everywhere and force you to flee outside in horror.

MAX

I hate you.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

I love you, too. [heart emoji]

Ugh. It just wasn't reasonable that he really did love her.

Looking at Nōwē, he said, "Don't tell anyone."

His cat's critical gaze made clear that as long as she was fed promptly with the expensive food, she'd probably keep his secrets.

Unless it served her needs better to betray him.

He sighed. "Yeah, fair."

The bookshop had better windows for catching the sun than the apartment did, so Nōwē never minded when they headed downstairs, as long as Max didn't forget that mealtimes were sacred.

He was getting an uptick in customers from the beginning of the school year, like people had remembered that books existed and it was important to read them. The day wasn't *busy*, but it was occupied enough that he couldn't slip into the back room for more than a few minutes, and he finally gave up and just sat up front behind the counter and tried to remember that scowling at customers was what Evie called "a deterrent to successful sales." Whatever. This was just what Max's face looked like. And if people really saw it as a deterrent to purchasing a book, then they probably didn't really want it.

He *did* appreciate the number of parents that brought their children in, though. It was never too early to instill a love of reading in someone. There were a few who were there because the library and the internet had failed them on their upcoming school project, and Max delighted whenever he could find something that would help.

It might have led to a couple of rants about fact-checking and the spread of misinformation on the internet, but he'd kept it PG. It was important to be a critical reader. And no, it wasn't unreasonable to teach that to a seven-year-old. Didn't parents realize the cesspit their child had access to on the internet? Of course they needed to be taught from a young age to question and verify! Honestly. Why wasn't there a test you had to take before you could become a parent?

He helped an older woman find a series that she remembered from her teen years, found four picture books about dogs for a very enthusiastic little boy who was planning to read to his new baby brother, managed to scrounge three mismatched copies of a book club read that the group insisted wouldn't hinder them even though the page counts didn't line up, logged three more requests for spells that he'd look into after closing given how the day was

going, and hung up on a very aggressive guy who seemed to want Max to go through his deceased father's book collection and return them to him, like he was a charity. Ugh.

He mostly ignored the texts from Evie, who had Sundays and Mondays off.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

You know, normal people have at least one day off a week. Preferably two. In fact, multiple countries have been trialing a 3-day weekend model for the wellness of their employees.

There's facts and everything.

She followed this up with links to multiple websites. He sighed.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

Just think about it, please. I don't want anything to happen to you.

Max sighed. This was how she got him every damn time.

MAX

I'll think about it.

He had a terrible feeling that she was going to show up on the 29th of December with a candidate in hand. But she couldn't actually arrange that from California, could she?

(The internet was a thing, dammit. She really could.)

Ugh. He didn't want to think about it. He didn't want another person in his space. He had enough trouble with customers being here sometimes.

He wasn't saying that he wanted robots to take over or anything, but… it might be a little more peaceful if they did.

(Would magic work on robots? Only if they'd gained intelligence? Could robots work magic? Would they end up with witch robots and robot shifters? Or were those, like, transformers?)

It was a relief to flip the sign to closed at five, although he reminded himself that customers were, in fact, essential for a business to run. (Evie was always telling him that it was important to be grateful and that you got back

from the world what you put into it. He wasn't sure that he believed her… but it might explain why he had grumpy customers.)

"I'm going to work in the back room for an hour. An hour and a half tops."

Nōwē's gaze was super judgmental.

"It's only five," he reminded her. "We stay open until eight some nights. I have a couple calls I need to resolve, that's all."

If a cat could roll her eyes, that's what Nōwē would be doing.

He really did have those calls, though, and he *did* start with those spells, truly… and then he just kept working. It was easy to lose track of the time in here, because there weren't any windows, and the work was so fascinating. Who needed a spell that would whiten their teeth only for ten minutes? Weren't people more likely to notice the difference? Was it only for critical photos or something? It wouldn't last through a meeting…

Max really didn't understand people.

Because he was only a mostly terrible cat dad, he set a timer—although it might have been for two hours—and when it went off, he made himself wrap up for the evening, taking note of where he'd been working and then shutting off the lights and activating the more powerful ward spell on his back room that he used when he wasn't in the shop. One of the benefits of collecting and reading spells was that he sometimes found really cool ones.

He headed back to the front, where Nōwē was still perched near the window. She meowed at him.

"Almost ready," he assured her. "Two of these were by email, so I'm going to send off the details now."

He always told his customers exactly what he found and let them decide if they wanted to spend the money on it. This email included info on how to pay him if they were happy with the results.

There was a thud against the window, startling him, but when he looked up, he didn't see anything. The sun had set, and it was getting dark. He went back to his email, but Nōwē began to yowl again.

"Almost done. I swear," he told her.

The yowling got louder and more urgent. It was not her normal "I'm starving, you haven't fed me in eternity" yowl. That one was more indignant and betrayed.

He stopped what he was doing—the email really could wait until tomorrow—and headed over to her.

"Are you okay, baby?"

She was pacing back and forth in front of the window. She looked totally fine—apart from the fact that she was clearly agitated and yowling loud enough to wake the dead.

“What is it?”

She jumped down from the window and ran over to the door, then looked back at him like he wasn’t reacting quickly enough. He followed her to the door, and when she screamed at it, he scooped her into his arms and then unlocked it.

Outside was dark and quiet. It was a Sunday evening, and the businesses in the area were closed. Nothing looked out of the ordinary, but Nōwē squawked at him again and squirmed like she was trying to leap out of his arms.

Max had no interest in chasing after her, so he tightened his grip, and then he saw the tiny red form lying in front of his window. He stepped closer, leaning down to see that it was a cardinal. He suddenly remembered the thud against his window. He grimaced. Had the bird hit the glass?

Shit. With the light on in the evening, the window shouldn’t have been reflecting outside, but… he couldn’t really argue that with the bird, now could he?

He also couldn’t leave it out here. He was pretty sure that small birds often broke their necks on impact. If Max was lucky, it was only stunned. But what if something came along and ate it in the meantime? Or someone who didn’t see it stepped on it?

He shuddered. Ugh, no, definitely not okay.

He tugged a handkerchief out of his pocket and carefully scooped the bird up, trying not to touch it. He knew that was important with baby birds, and he figured it couldn’t hurt with adults.

Weirdly, Nōwē was totally calm as he did this. She’d somehow squirmed out of his hold after all, but she’d climbed up to perch on his shoulder like he was her personal cat tree. He’d assumed that she was looking for her next meal. Did she think that he was bringing the bird in for her to eat?

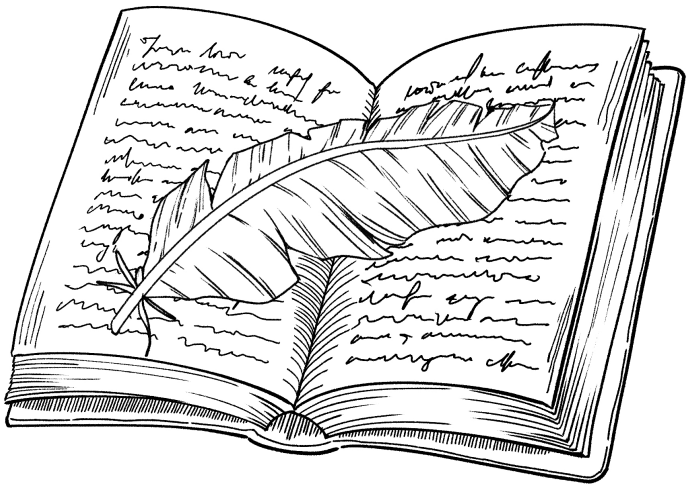
Well, she’d just have to learn to live with disappointment.

He got everyone back inside, closed and locked the door again, and then carried the bird and his cat up to his apartment.

Once they got inside, Nōwē leaped down, but she didn’t even try to trip him as he carried the bird into the kitchen area. He set it down on his kitchen island, leaned closed, and nearly sagged with relief when he saw it was still breathing, its little legs twitching now and again, even if its eyes were closed. A quick internet search had him making it a little nest with a towel in a box.

The internet told him not to try to give it any water—which, why would anyone try to do that when a being was unconscious? He shook his head at humanity's collective foolishness. Now he just had to wait.

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Chapter Three

Rory

Rory woke up slowly with the feeling that his head had hurt quite a bit. Thankfully, his shifter healing was already taking care of it, and it was more the memory of an ache than an actual ache now.

He was… on something soft? He tried to eye his surroundings, but it was dark. He hopped to his feet and began to glow faintly. He was… in a cardboard box? But also on a nice fluffy towel. The lid was on the box, which didn't seem like a great thing, but there were uneven holes punched around the sides, so it looked like someone wanted him to be able to breathe.

Why was he in a box?

There was a meow outside the box, and Rory cut off his glow. The cat noises grew louder, and a moment later, a voice said, "I'm coming. Hold your horses."

The lid of the box was lifted off, and Rory blinked up at… oh.

Right! He'd been so shocked by the sight of this man that he'd actually smacked into the window, bird instincts temporarily taking over and not seeing the glass that was between them.

His brain didn't parse human proportions and attractiveness quite the same way in this form as it did when he was in his human form, but that didn't really matter to Rory. He'd found his mate! After so very, very long, he'd finally found his mate.

The man had dark hair, brown eyes, a large nose—although, really, all of him looked large right now—and nice lips that were currently stretched into a smile. His life force sparked bright and long, which made Rory happy.

"You're awake! I hope that means you aren't hurt," the man said.

Rory chirped at him, not that the man could understand. But Rory was so excited, it wasn't like he could *not* say something. He kept chirping, and then he fluttered out of the box and came to land on the man's shoulder, cuddling up to his neck. The man's hand raised instinctively, but then he didn't seem to know what to do with it.

Rory rubbed against the man's neck several times, and eventually, the man reached out with a gentle finger and stroked his side. Rory sang his approval.

"I'm still not sure I'm supposed to be touching you," the man pointed out. "Are other birds going to think you smell human and shun you or something?"

Rory just leaned further into the man's warm skin, wanting to be as close to him as possible.

A cat suddenly appeared on the counter where the box had been resting.

"Nōwē!" The man sounded exasperated. "You know you're not supposed to be on the counter. Not in the kitchen."

The cat paid this scolding no mind, which was very like a cat. They were highly intelligent… and highly uninterested in doing anything other than what they wanted.

The hand was suddenly cupped around Rory protectively so that he couldn't see the cat anymore.

"No," the man said sternly. "The bird is *not* food. You can't eat it, Nōwē."

Rory peered a little to the side.

The cat sat down on the counter and licked her paws with supreme indifference, beginning to give herself a bath.

If Nōwē tried to eat Rory, it would not go well for her, and from the look of the cat, she was well aware of that fact.

Like Rory had said, cats were smart.

The man sounded like he was a little doubtful when he said, "Okay, just see that you behave." He lowered his hand again. "I, uh, don't think I have any food that's good for birds, but I could at least get you some water before I let you go. That would be better than nothing, right? Right."

Rory got to ride his shoulder over to the sink as he found a saucer and filled it with water, then set it on the counter.

Faced with the vessel filled with liquid, Rory couldn't resist. If he'd run into the glass hard enough to knock himself out, he must have landed on the ground. He hopped in and started to have a bath, flicking the water everywhere in his enthusiasm.

There was a beat of silence, and then the man laughed, the warm sound echoing around the room.

"I didn't think of that. Uh, sure, why don't you have a bath and get cleaned up. And I'll, uh, I'll get another saucer so that you can have a drink."

The man suited actions to words, and once Rory had finished with his bath, he hopped over to the nice, clean water and had a drink. He trilled his thanks to the man, who smiled down at him softly.

Then his brow furrowed. "I don't want to put you outside at night if you're damp. That's a terrible idea."

Rory ran hot and would be totally fine, but he wasn't going to correct the man—because he couldn't talk in this form *and* because he wanted to spend as much time with his mate as possible.

Instead, he flew over and landed back in the box, rubbing against the towel.

The man was nodding slowly. "I mean, that should be okay for the night, right? You'll be able to dry, and then I can let you go in the morning. It'll be light, you'll be dry, and surely that's safer. There's probably fewer predators during the day, right?" He frowned. "Why don't I know very much about bird predators? Nōwē, we're going to have to add that to the list of things to investigate in the morning. Also, how to make glass safer for birds. We're not having this happen again."

The cat meowed, and Rory settled down in his box. The man looked at it for a long moment and then put two saucers in the box, one filled with water and the other "for him to do his business, not that I think birds can be potty trained, but better to try, right?"

Generally speaking, bird brains and bodies weren't built to make use of waste disposal locations. They weren't actually holding it so that they could poop on humans' cars. Usually.

But Rory was far from your average bird, so he chirped his thanks. He didn't often eat much in this form, but he *could*. He wasn't completely

governed by bird instincts, though, so if he needed to evacuate any waste, he'd use the plate and not soil his mate's towel. He was pretty sure that wouldn't be a great way to start a relationship.

The man smiled down at him. "Okay. Have a good night. We'll sort this all out in the morning."

Rory chirped happily.

The man put the lid back on the box, and Rory settled into the soft folds of fabric. Everything still felt slightly off-balance. Hitting the glass hadn't actually killed him (he would have been reborn, and that was impossible to miss), but he thought it might have been a close thing.

Rory listened to the sounds of the man scooping up the cat and saying that he could sleep in the bedroom with him tonight. Rory smiled to himself. His mate was protecting him. Even if Rory didn't need it, he appreciated the sentiment very much.

He squirmed around a bit until he was comfortable, then he closed his eyes and slept.



In the morning, Rory was still in a box—this was such a novel experience, he'd never lived in a box before!—but he was soon rescued by his mate, who lifted the lid and said good morning to him.

Rory flew up to sit on the man's shoulder once more. He liked his warmth and proximity, and there was nowhere Rory would rather be. It was one of the many benefits of this form. He could tuck himself right up to the man's neck and not get in the way. (He also liked observing people, he didn't have to worry about money, and human concerns were further away. Sometimes he needed a break, and he spent a lot of time as a bird.)

His mate spent a couple of minutes petting him, and Rory peered around the room. He was in an apartment, from the look of it. There was an open-

concept living room and kitchen, with shelves of books lining every wall. He caught a glimpse of a bedroom through an open door, and he assumed the other door was to the bathroom.

It wasn't very big, but it looked comfortable and lived in.

The cat began to complain, and Rory's mate got breakfast ready for both of them.

He sounded apologetic when he told Rory that he didn't have any food for him.

Rory chirped at him, not at all worried. His body didn't really work like that, so it was fine. If he shifted into his natural form, he could go without food for ages. The bird and human forms would require sustenance eventually, but it wasn't urgent.

Once the man finished breakfast and cleaned up, he sighed.

"We'd better go downstairs."

He left the cat in the apartment, which she was not happy about, but the man ignored her.

Rory enjoyed the ride down the stairs into the bookshop. They passed through a beaded curtain that made a pleasant clicking sound. Where the apartment had been full of books, the bookshop was *stuffed* with them. They weren't disordered, exactly, but it looked like there were maybe twenty percent more books than there was really space for, so some of the piles were a bit haphazard.

The man strode past all the books to the front door, flipped the lock, paused for a moment and drew in a deep breath, then pulled open the door and marched through.

Rory looked around himself, wondering what the man was bracing himself for. Rory was totally willing to help. Only there… didn't seem to be anything?

He chirped and looked around again, but really, it was a quiet morning on a street filled with small commercial shops. A few fallen leaves made a rasping sound as they skittered by on the sidewalk. In the distance, a few other birds chirped. There was a bit of coolness in the air, but nothing that Rory had to worry about.

It was a nice day, as far as he could tell.

And then the man said, "Uh, is there a reason you're not flying off? Birds normally fly off, don't they?"

Oh, right. Rory had forgotten about the man's plan since it ran so contrary to Rory's own. The man thought that he was releasing Rory back into the wild, and he had no idea that Rory's intention from the moment he'd found the man was to stay with him forever.

How best to approach this when he didn't have human vocal cords right now?

He cuddled into the man's neck again, rubbing his feathers against him, and the man's fingers came up as though on automatic and stroked him a few times.

"Well, I guess it would be okay if you stayed for a little while. The hardware store opens at eight, and they probably have birdseed. I'll get you something to eat, and we'll see if you feel better in a few hours, okay?"

Rory cuddled into him again, not thinking he was imagining the tension was lessening in the shoulder that he was riding on.

Most witches and shifters had lost the knack of attuning to the Magic and actually paying attention to how it directed people in the world. Rory's witch was likely unaware that he'd just found his mate. But perhaps he felt a desire he couldn't explain to keep Rory.

Rory fluffed up at the idea, feeling very proud of being attractive to his mate, even if that was silly.

They headed back inside, returning to the apartment to let Nōwē out. She yowled her displeasure at her human, who didn't seem at all fazed by this.

"Come on," he said. "Red's going to stick with us for a little while. They're not food, Nōwē, okay?"

The cat shot him a scathing glare which he didn't seem to notice.

"We don't open until 11 on Sundays and Mondays," Max explained. He didn't actually seem to expect Rory to understand, but he appeared to be used to giving commentary about what he was doing. Maybe he often spoke to his cat? "Gives me time to get errands done and do some work in the back room. That's where all the spellbooks are."

Rory chirped in agreement. That was a very sensible way to do it. Normal people were doubtful and unobservant, but there was no reason to strain the World Spell unnecessarily.

"Please don't poop on the books," the man said.

Rory chirped at him indignantly, and Nōwē hissed in amusement. Rory could practically feel the superiority coming off her since *she* hadn't been

accused of pooping on books. Rory pecked at the man's neck, making him startle and reach up.

"Ow, okay, sorry. I just don't want anything to happen to the books."

That wasn't unreasonable. Books were important.

The man headed into his back room, Rory along for the ride, and he felt the magic wash over them as they entered. His mate had some excellent spells protecting the room, and when Rory saw how many spellbooks there were, he understood why. Some people would pay a lot to get into a room like this.

Witches could only use their magic by casting spells. And since Spellsmiths were rare and expensive, already-created spells were protected—and in some cases, hoarded.

Rory found this behavior bizarre—but he routinely died, burst into flames, burned to ashes, and then was reborn. He didn't tend to be invested in material possessions.

He *did* understand that normal people, witches, and non-mythical shifters lived much shorter lives, and they needed a way to preserve their knowledge and pass it down. Books were sensible inventions. Rory was quite proud of people for figuring that out.

Perched on his mate's shoulder, Rory soon realized that he was a Spellreader, and he seemed to be intently identifying spells and correctly labeling them. Rory liked that. People had figured out how to preserve knowledge and pass it along, so it always puzzled him when they refused to actually do that. Protecting shifters and witches from normal people had sadly proved to be necessary, but hoarding knowledge from fellow witches was counterproductive, wasn't it?

His mate was very intent on his task, and he startled when his alarm went off. He fished his phone out of his pocket and shut off the strident sound.

"Okay, I'm going to pop over to the hardware store. It's just down the street, so it shouldn't take long. You can stay in here, since I can't explain to normal people why a cardinal is on my shoulder. I'll just add a spell to keep cats out, alright? I mean, I'm sure Nōwē's going to behave, but better to be safe than sorry, right?"

Rory trilled happily.

His mate rifled through a couple books, double checked a spell, which had been neatly labeled "keep one or more cats to a maximum of fifteen from crossing the threshold and entering a room" and then quickly sketched

it in the air and then infused it with his magic. Rory admired how it hung there for a moment, glowing softly, before it dissipated.

“There we go,” his mate said with a firm nod. “Be good while I’m gone, okay?”

Rory chirped his agreement and hopped down onto the table where his mate had been working. His mate smiled at him, then ducked through the beaded curtain separating this room from the hallway. A second later, Rory heard the second curtain that separated the hallway from the main part of the shop, and finally, the sound of the door opening and closing, then being locked.

Nōwē came to sit outside the room and meowed in protest at not being allowed inside. Rory had the feeling that his mate was going to be punished for that later, but he genuinely appreciated how much the witch was taking care of him.

He flew around the room a few times, looking at all the books. There were only a few that were open where his mate had been checking them before his alarm went off. They were of academic interest only to Rory, because he was a shifter. As a mythical shifter, he had certain magical abilities that were enhanced or that regular shifters didn’t possess at all, but he still couldn’t cast spells like witches could. Their innate magic was simply different.

He hadn’t been paying attention when the first Spellsmiths had created the first spells so long ago. It was fascinating to him just how many spells now existed, and how there were such specific ones, like one that kept cats out of rooms but no other animals. Rory assumed that he could leave if he wanted to, though he wasn’t going to test that.

Eventually, he settled down on the table and just rested until his mate came back, to the loud complaints of Nōwē.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, but I had to make sure Red was safe.” Max’s voice turned scolding. “I know how cats get when it comes to prey, so don’t look at me like that.”

Nōwē was back by the door now as Rory’s mate approached, and her tail lashed back and forth.

The witch cast an “undo” charm, and Nōwē burst into the room, still meowing a stentorian protest. She pointedly did *not* approach Rory, just stalked around the entire room that she’d been denied.

Rory's mate was carrying a reusable bag, and the first thing he pulled out was a cat toy. *Smart.* He set it on the floor, and it began to wiggle around the room in an erratic motion that immediately caught Nōwē's attention. She attempted to ignore it for a few more moments, but Rory saw the exact moment that she decided to go for it, even if her owner was in her bad books.

She leaped for the toy, and the witch's lips tipped up into a satisfied smile. Then he turned his attention back to Rory.

"I got you a mixed bag of small seeds. The internet tells me you eat seeds, but obviously only eat what you want."

He looked around like he expected a feeding dish to magically appear, and then he cursed, scooped Rory up and set him on his shoulder, and dashed back up to his apartment to get several bowls.

He filled one shallowly with water.

"This is just for drinking!" he told Rory, and then carefully carried them back down to the spell room.

Rory's mate cleared a table of books, set down the bowls, and then tore open the package of seeds and poured some into the empty bowl.

"There!" he told Rory, smiling at him. "Just for you."

Rory flew down to the table and obediently began to peck at the seeds. It was a nice mix, and he was happy to eat it if it made his mate feel better. He chirped a thank you and then went back to eating more seeds.

"I also got this."

Rory looked up and saw that his mate was flourishing… a pen? It was thick and white. Rory chirped at him in confusion.

"I started looking up how to make glass safer for birds," Max explained, and there's these strips of dots that you can apply, but they didn't have any in the hardware store. I'll have to order them online. In the meantime, though, apparently, if I draw a design on the window with gaps of not more than two inches, birds will see them along with the reflection and will realize they can't fit through to what they think is the other side. So no other birds should hit the window like you did. I'm really sorry that you got hurt. I didn't realize it was a problem. And I'll talk to the local business owners at our next meeting and make sure they're all aware of the danger, too."

Rory stared at this man in awe. He'd discovered a problem, and he was forging ahead to fix it, wanting to make the world a better place for Rory

and his feathered friends. Rory sang him a happy song and then went back to his seeds.

His mate set the marker down on the table.

“I’m going to take care of it after work today, okay? I’ve got a few more orders for witches that I need to fulfill.”

Rory chirped an acknowledgement and continued to eat the seed and drink water, listening to the sounds of his mate flipping through book pages, scribbling notes, and occasionally pausing to take photos with his phone or tap away at it. Nōwē continued to play with her cat toy. It made weird thumps when it ran into things on the ground, and Rory found it very entertaining.

His mate worked until an alarm went off once again. He closed the book he was working on, rose to his feet, and stretched. Should Rory have been prompting him to take breaks? Should *he* have food and water? Oh, was Rory being a terrible mate?

But the witch just smiled as Rory flew over and perched again on his shoulder, rubbing against his neck in apology. His hand came up, his fingers delicately stroking Rory’s feathers.

“Time to open the store. Come on.”

They headed out to the main shop, and his mate turned on the lights, looked around at the shop, and then went to flip the closed sign to open as he unlocked the door.

There was no immediate arrival of customers, so his mate settled at the counter, where he had a tall stool, and did some work on the computer. He answered emails and uploaded some of the photos from his phone. Rory realized he was sending spells to those witches he’d talked about earlier.

And apparently, one of them got annoyed, because when his mate answered the shop’s phone—still a landline with *cords*—there was yelling.

“Read for a Spell. Max speaking.”

Max! Rory’s mate had a name. Max was an excellent name.

“The spell doesn’t do what I want!” a voice snapped.

“What spell is that?” Max asked.

“The one you just sent me!” the man snarled.

Max sounded impatient when he said, “I send a lot of spells to a lot of people. Would you care to be more specific?”

The man let out an angry huff like Max was being unreasonable. Did he really expect Max to recognize his voice and have memorized what spell

he’d asked for? That was very unreasonable.

“I’m Horace Humperdink. I requested a spell that would prevent someone from saying the word Tuesday!”

“I remember now, Mr. Humperdink. Well?” Max asked crisply.

“The spell you sent me doesn’t actually prevent someone from saying Tuesday! They only hesitate a bit. They can still get the word out!”

“Mr. Humperdink, I find existing spells, and they aren’t always exactly what a witch wants. Additionally, as I’m sure you know, coercion spells are closely monitored. I clearly outlined that in the document I sent you, and you accepted it and the spell.”

The man sputtered. “But that’s not acceptable! Why can’t you change it?”

“Because I’m a Spellreader, not a Spellsmith,” Max said in a bored tone.

“But if you can read it, why can’t you modify it?”

Beginning to sound really exasperated, Max enunciated bitingly, “Because I’m a Spell*reader*, not a Spell*smith*.”

“That is not acceptable! I want a refund!” Horace’s voice was very shrill.

“As the document you signed clearly indicates, no refunds will be issued if you choose to accept the spell I provided, which you did. You can’t get a refund.”

“But it doesn’t do what I want!” the man yelled.

“It’s as close as you’re going to get with a non-regulated, non-coercive spell,” Max snapped. “You deemed it close enough when you accepted it, and if you’ve now changed your mind, that’s not my fault. You should have read the document more carefully.”

The man made an outraged noise. “I’m going to make a complaint against you!”

“You’re welcome to try,” Max said, sounding bored again. “If you want to trouble the Council with the fact that the spell you ordered, accepted as-is, and had delivered to you isn’t, in fact, the spell that you wanted, then I can’t stop you.”

It was clear that Max didn’t think the Council would care about such things. The combined council of witches and shifters usually dealt with big infractions, and Rory had to agree that Max had done nothing wrong.

There was silence on the line for a moment, and then Horace said, “I will never be using your services again!”

“I’m sure that will be a relief to both of us,” Max told him, hanging up the phone even as the man spluttered.

“Asshole,” Max muttered. “I even have a section in bold that they have to tickbox to say that they accept the spell as-is based on the description provided in the document. Why do I even bother?”

Rory rubbed his head against Max’s neck, trying to soothe him. Max petted him some more, and he did relax a bit. He went back to his work at the computer.

Nōwē seemed to tire of the toy and came to jump up onto the display area in front of the window. It wasn’t super sunny yet, but it still offered a nice view of everything that was going on outside.

After noon, a few customers came into the shop, including a group of older ladies and two men who were apparently in a book club who liked extra spicy books, which Rory eventually figured out meant they had lots of sex in them. (He hadn’t thought normal people had started eating books, and he hadn’t been able to see why paper would be spicy, but people did things that confused Rory all the time.)

There were several parents with babies or toddlers in strollers who seemed to be grateful for the opportunity to sit down for a few minutes. More witches called with spell requests. And a man with a box of very clearly damaged books got annoyed when Max told him that they were fit for nothing but the garbage given that he’d taken such poor care of them. Max wasn’t very diplomatic, but he was quite truthful.

Max popped up to his apartment to get a sandwich in the early afternoon, and he put more seeds out for Rory—and then gave Nōwē a bit of food, because she didn’t think that she should be the only one not eating.

It stayed quieter in the afternoon, to the point where Max decided that he might as well get to work on the design for the window. He lugged a ladder out of what proved to be a small storage closet in the back, then set it up on the sidewalk in front of the window.

He climbed up, explaining, “The instructions online say it should be drawn on the outside of the window where the birds are in danger of hitting, as that offers maximum visibility. I assume that also means it will wear off more quickly, but hopefully it’ll last long enough for me to order the dots.” He stared at the window. “Although it would be cool if the design could be something for the bookshop, I suppose. It might even attract customers.” He huffed a disgusted breath. “Not that I really want to attract customers. But Evie insists that’s kind of essential when you run a business, and she’s not exactly wrong. Unfortunately.”

Rory rubbed his head against Max's neck again in commiseration. His mate didn't seem to be as worried this time that Rory was going to fly away.

About thirty minutes later, however, he was growing increasingly concerned that *Max* was going to run away.

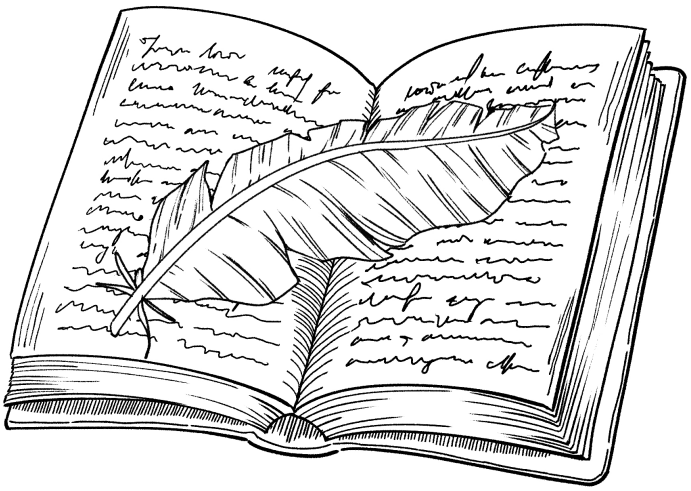
"Ugh!" he yelled at the window. "Why am I so bad at this?"

Rory already knew that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with his mate, but he had to admit… the man was not an artist. He was stubborn, but he was not an artist. Nōwē had prowled back and forth inside the window display at first, watching what Max was doing, but then she gave up and curled up to go to sleep.

"It's fine," Max muttered to himself, sounding like it was definitely not fine. "I'll just try again, for the… ten millionth time."

And then a voice offered quietly, "I can do it, if you want."

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Chapter Four

Max

Max turned sharply and wobbled slightly on the ladder, which was steadied by the person standing below him. It was the teen enby, the one who always came into the shop. They'd *never* talked to Max before, and Max just stared at them, stunned, for a foolishly long moment.

And then he climbed down the ladder and pressed the marker into the kid's hands, even as he realized they were slightly taller than he was. If the kid was past 5'10" already, Max wondered how tall they'd end up.

But that didn't matter right now. All that mattered was that their artistic skill be at least slightly better than Max's.

"I will pay you money; please don't fall off the ladder and die," Max begged. "It would be so amazing if I didn't have to be the one doing this."

The kid smirked, a rather endearing expression on a face that Max had mostly seen shadowed by hair as they ducked and didn't make eye contact. They eyed the window critically.

"You were trying to do… what, exactly?"

Max grimaced, but he couldn't really blame them for not being able to figure out his awful scribbles.

He explained, "I need a design that doesn't have gaps more than two inches wide to reduce the chances that a bird will hit the window because they don't see the glass."

The kid's eyes flicked to the cardinal perched on Max's shoulder, but they didn't say anything.

Max's hands came up to pet the bird reflexively. "Red hit the glass and was knocked unconscious yesterday. Thankfully, they weren't killed. I don't want that to happen to any other birds."

The kid nodded. "Got it."

Waving his hand vaguely at the window, Max said, "I was imagining I could do something book-themed, but clearly, not my skillset."

The kid's lips twitched, and they agreed, "Definitely not. But that's what delegating is for."

Max liked this mouthy side to them. He wondered if they'd been quiet just because it was a bookshop. Maybe they were nervous or shy—or maybe they just hadn't had anything to say before, but they took pity on fools who thought they'd suddenly acquire artistic talent.

"I'm Max, by the way," he belatedly introduced himself. "He/him."

The kid nodded. "Alex. They/them. Mostly."

"Nice to meet you," Max said. "I really appreciate the rescue. If you feel comfortable, let me know if I ever get your pronouns wrong. Or if you prefer me to refer to you always by your name, I can do that, too."

Alex nodded one more time, and then their gaze was on the window, taking it all in and looking like they were making plans, which, now that Max thought about it, was probably part of the reason he'd been having trouble.

"You want me to put your bag inside?" he offered.

Alex nodded and handed over their backpack.

"If you need me to spot you, just give a yell," Max said. "We close at five." The kid probably already knew that because they were always here. "But I'll be around for a while."

He checked his watch and saw that it was just after three-thirty, suggesting Alex had come straight from school. The nearest high school was about a fifteen-minute walk away.

Alex hummed a sound that was probably agreement. Max would stay up front, he decided, and not venture into the back room where he couldn't keep an eye on them. Magic could do a lot of awesome and sometimes very obscure things, but there were also things it *couldn't* do. No divination or fortune-telling. No scrying or long-distance visions, although a modest enhancement to hearing and vision was possible (though still within a limited distance). There wasn't a spell to win the lottery, although Max had come across spells on occasion that were meant to make people lucky or unlucky.

If Max had been smart, he would have cast a charm to steady the ladder, but casting out in the open was never a great idea. The World Spell would

probably ensure no normal person noticed, but it was best to leave the Spell to deal with the emergencies and accidents rather than assume it could cover up day-to-day spells cast out of laziness or imprudence.

Spells that could be considered a curse were generally illegal and could bring the Council down on you, as well as severe sanctions to a living Spellsmith if they were the one to create it. That's why Max had the safe in the back room, since he never knew what spells he'd come across, and it was protected by as many normal and magical protections as he could manage.

Occasionally, Max destroyed a spell, because while he believed in knowledge, there were some spells that should clearly never have been invented. He wasn't about to be the reason that something terrible was rediscovered.

Max puttered around the shop for a few minutes and then settled onto his stool behind the counter once more, half checking his emails and half keeping an eye on Alex, because he really didn't want the kid to fall.

"I should have just tried to draw dots two inches apart," Max realized as he watched Alex at work. "I could probably have managed that."

He'd gotten grand ideas that were definitely outside of his wheelhouse. Still, though, Alex seemed like they genuinely wanted to help. Maybe Max could even spin this into getting the help that Evie kept nagging him about.

He took out his phone to snap a pic and then realized he couldn't do that without asking first. He'd send a photo of the finished art, instead, if Alex was okay with it. It would be excellent proof, too, because his sister would know instantly that it wasn't something *he'd* managed to do.

Feeling much better about that, Max went back to his emails. There were a flurry of calls over the next half hour, and Max eventually worked out that one of the nearby elementary schools had set a reading assignment that specifically required reading a second-hand book. Apparently, it was meant to kindle a love of reading *and* sustainability. It meant that Max had to deal with more people, which wasn't ideal, but he could get behind the overall message.

He could do without the constant interruptions, though. Maybe if they did this again, they could actually book an afternoon, and everyone could come at once and get it over with? All the parents seemed disappointed that he closed at 5pm today, but he confirmed his hours for the rest of the week and refrained from pointing out that he had a website, and it was actually quite easy to look up his hours without needing to bother him.

He wondered if Evie would be proud of his restraint.

He got distracted enough that it wasn't until his alarm went off letting him know it was closing time that he really focused on the window and Alex again. His jaw nearly dropped. Although it was all in white marker, a rainbow stretched proudly across the top of the window. Leaves swirled across the glass, with books swept up in the invisible wind, some closed, some opened, pages curling. All of this was worked around the Read for a Spell logo, which was in large gold letters across the glass, perched over an open book with swirling sparkles around it.

It was exactly the sort of thing Max had imagined doing and exactly what he was incapable of producing. Nōwē was intently watching Alex work.

He couldn't blame her.

Max came outside to look at the design properly. It looked even better from the front with no reflections blocking any of it.

"This is amazing," Max said. "You're really talented."

Alex's cheeks flushed, and they mumbled, "It's fine."

"I can't believe you were able to do this so quickly. You saw what I managed."

Alex snorted.

Max grinned. "Yeah, so maybe I don't have the opinion of an art expert, but it's exactly what I wanted."

Smiling, still looking a bit bashful, Alex said, "I'm glad." They eyed it critically. "It could be better, but I don't spend a lot of time doing art from the top of a ladder."

"You'll get no complaints from me. Thank you for not falling to your doom, by the way. That would be a lot of paperwork."

Alex rolled their eyes.

"Is it alright if I take a photo? I want to send it to my sister."

"It's your window," Alex said with a shrug, but Max thought they looked kind of pleased.

"You want to be in there as the artist?"

They shook their head hurriedly, and Max was glad he hadn't taken the photo earlier. He snapped the photo and then sent it off to his sister.

MAX

I got someone to decorate the window. No more bird collisions!

There was no immediate response, so he shoved the phone back in his pocket and said, "Come on in; I've got your bag."

Alex came in and scooped up their backpack, and Max tugged out his wallet and pulled out sixty bucks.

They baulked. “That’s too much.”

“No, look,” Max told them sternly. “You worked for almost two hours.” An hour and a half. Whatever. “Two hours would be thirty bucks minimum wage. And your work is way better than minimum wage.”

Alex protested a couple more times, but Max stayed firm, and eventually, they pocketed the money.

“I’ll keep an eye on it,” Alex promised. “See if it needs touching up.”

Max knew when not to argue. “That would be great. Thanks.” He considered for a moment. “Actually, I was going to order these dots you stick on so that birds see they can’t get through the space, but your art is so good, I was wondering if you’d consider doing seasonal displays.”

Alex blinked at him. “Uh, yeah, I guess I could do that.”

“White’s the best color to ensure the birds see it,” Max explained. “So I’d have to restrict you to a boring palette, but other than that, anything that seems to fit the season, if you don’t mind erasing your art.”

Belatedly, Max wondered if that was a rude request.

But Alex just shrugged. “When you use an ephemeral medium, you’re going to get ephemeral results.”

Right, then.

“Thanks a lot,” Max told them. “You really saved my bacon today. Also the eyes of every passerby.”

Alex smirked, slinging their bag over their shoulder by one strap. “No problem. See you later.”

Max watched the kid go, noticing that they were standing a lot taller than they usually did. It was absolutely, positively frowned upon and totally illegal to cast harmful spells on normal people, but Max wondered if there were some people in Alex’s life who were deserving of a curse or two.

After he’d closed up, fed Nōwē and Red, and eaten another sandwich—Red chirped at him until he dug out some sad looking carrots and chopped them up and ate them, too—Max headed back down to his back room, where he found a “do not notice” spell that he could cast on Red.

“It’ll help reduce the chance that anyone sees you. I don’t mind you hanging out if that’s what you want to do, but normal people aren’t used to seeing cardinals on people’s shoulders.”

His parents had both been witches, and his mom had had a familiar, a mouse named Thistle. And normal people did *not* react well to seeing a

mouse scurrying around anywhere. Thistle had spent a lot of time in one of Mom's pockets, but she would explore sometimes, too. His mom had been an expert at casting the "do not notice" charm that allowed Thistle to roam freely. It was different from an "is not there" spell, because people still instinctively went around or stepped over Thistle so that she'd stay safe.

She'd been with Mom in the car crash, though it likely wouldn't have mattered. Death of the witch usually resulted in the death of the familiar—and the reverse could be true, as well. At a minimum, it left the other weak and emotionally wrecked.

Max pushed the thought away. The accident had been quick, at least, and there was nothing they could do about it now. It had been senseless, but there was a lot about life that was.

Red rubbed against his neck like they were trying to soothe Max, and he smiled a little and reached up to gently stroke their feathers, earning himself a cheery chirp. Max wasn't saying he thought Red was his familiar—there'd been a period where he thought Nōwē might be, and he'd been proved wrong there—but he wasn't *not* saying it, either.

This was something that shouldn't be rushed into. He'd see what happened.

A cardinal was a wild animal, but witches were usually more in tune with nature than normal humans were. Witches didn't experience a Disney princess version of the animal kingdom… but it swung a little more to that end of the spectrum with their familiar. And this bird was definitely not behaving normally.

On the other hand, some animals had grown very used to humans in their day-to-day lives. If Red had spent a lot of time in a yard with a feeder, or if they had perhaps been hand-raised after their parents were killed… Okay, he didn't want to think about Red's parents being killed. But maybe the bird knew that humans were an excellent source of food and that they were safe.

Max frowned to himself. Not that humans were safe. Humans were the single most dangerous being on the planet, and some of them could be downright mean. But bird brains weren't super complex, so maybe Red had been treated well by humans and now believed that universally.

This hopefully wouldn't do Red any real harm. If they'd already decided humans were safe, then Max wasn't making it worse.

He should get more bird seed, though.

"Is there a kind of bird seed that you prefer?" Max asked Red, like they could answer.

Red chirped at him, sounding very cheerful, and then hopped down to wander across the table and not answer Max's question. Because they were a bird.

"I'll pick up some more at the hardware store tomorrow. And more of those pens for Alex."

Max tried to shop local when he could. He had to do big box stores sometimes, but he was a bookshop that survived on people continuing to find value in small, independently owned businesses. He tried to do the same.

(Also, fortunately for him, big box stores couldn't offer spells like he could. Perish the thought.)

He catalogued spells for another hour, then went through another couple of the boxes that he'd received from an estate sale. Although he tried to make discerning purchases, there were times where the only way to see if there was anything of value was to buy the lot and then weed through it.

Depending on whether it was total trash or not impacted just how annoyed he was with the entire process. Every once in a while, he found something really amazing, and he tried to tell himself that meant the rest of the time was worthwhile.

Today was not one of those times.

Finally, he gave it up as a bad job and headed upstairs. Nōwē still thought tripping him was the most efficient way to get upstairs. Cats didn't take up that much space; it was a mystery of the universe how they managed to cover the entirety of every step he was trying to climb.

Red chirped happily.

"You know," Max pointed out, "if I fall, I'll take you with me."

Red stretched out their wings and then rubbed against his neck again. Was that… a direct response to his comment?

When he got the door to the apartment open, Red took off, flying over to the open kitchen area and landing by their saucer of water.

Or, Max acknowledged wryly, maybe they were just thirsty.

Lots of witches never found a familiar, he reminded himself. These days were especially weird, when the trend had turned to trying to get a shifter as a familiar. If it worked, you got more power than you would from an animal familiar bond. But you lost the unconditional acceptance and uncomplicated relationship between a human and an animal. (Okay, Max had a cat; some animals could be very judgmental. But still, it was different than a human relationship.) He wasn't sure that it was a good idea to add human emotions and human relationships to a bond. And it was exceedingly rare for a shifter

familiar bond to not be a sexual one. Not utterly unheard of, but not common at all.

Max grimaced to himself. He understood that lots of people liked sex a lot, but he'd never really understood *why*. It seemed like a lot of fuss and bother.

Surely, a nice stable animal familiar bond was preferable in every way? There was no worry about a relationship going south or anything like that.

Yeah, that was definitely the way to go.

And as Max looked at Red, once again trying to bathe in their drink saucer, he couldn't help but hope that maybe he'd found his familiar.

He would deny to his dying day that he was lonely. He didn't like people, and he had Nōwē, which was awesome. But… just occasionally, he wanted something more.



The next several days let them settle into a routine. The "do not notice" spell worked very well, and he got no comments from any of his customers about having a bird riding on his shoulder or flitting about the shop. The spell worked best the quieter the subject was, but Red tended to chirp more when they were with Alex and Nōwē rather than surrounded by strangers.

Alex showed up every day—which they'd been doing already, but now they checked on the window and said hi before they disappeared into the back section and claimed one of the comfy chairs for their own.

Max had already emailed the Chamber of Commerce and the small business association Facebook group with a link to the site where they could get the dots, including ones that looked see-through to a human eye but appeared purple to birds, who had a fourth cone in their eye and could see ultraviolet frequencies. (Max was learning a lot about birds.) He'd included statistics on just how many birds were estimated to die from collisions each year (it was staggering), and if he implied that this small effort on their part

would prevent them from being complicit in mass murder… well, he wasn't wrong, was he?

He'd also included the photo of his storefront with details about the marker and the design specifications.

He'd concluded it with: *I know we all want to do our part to contribute to a safe, sustainable downtown business core, full of happy people who want to make purchases without needing to step over bird carcasses.*

Too much? Eh. It didn't hurt to link it to the bottom line *and* being responsible humans.

Evie actually called him to talk about the window, and he explained about Red being knocked unconscious and how he didn't want it to happen again.

"You're seriously wandering around with a bird on your shoulder?" she wanted to know.

"I think Red likes how warm I am," Max said with a shrug.

Red rubbed against his neck.

"And they're not, like, pooping all over the books?" Evie demanded.

"They're not," Max said, amused. "They actually don't poop as much as I thought they would. But I haven't actually watched a bird to see how often they do their business."

Snorting, Evie conceded, "True enough. I guess most of us only notice those spectacular moments when they poop on us."

"And Red hasn't done that even once," Max said triumphantly.

Statistically, it was probably only a matter of time, but Max knew how to operate a laundry machine. It wasn't the end of the world.

"You know," Evie mused, "you sound almost affectionate. Almost, dare I say it, *social*."

"I'm hanging up on you," Max threatened.

Evie's laughter rang through the air. "Remember moments like these. It's not always terrible and the worst thing ever."

"Animals aren't people," Max told her flatly. "People *are* the worst thing ever."

His sister just laughed again. "I agree they can be kind of awful sometimes. But they can also be amazing! Just… don't always assume it's not the good one."

Max sighed. "I'll try."

But he wasn't going to try that hard.

Evie sounded exasperated when she said, "Don't think I've forgotten about you needing to hire someone. I mean it about my visit. You better get on it!"

“Uh huh,” Max said flatly.

She huffed with amusement. “Okay, okay, I’m going. But don’t forget!”

She hung up before he could have the last word. Typical.

Max left Red upstairs in the apartment for D&D on Friday. Though he was confident that his spell was good, this was a couple of hours in sustained close proximity with people. They could get loud, snacks were occasionally thrown, and it didn’t seem like a safe environment for a bird that no one else could see.

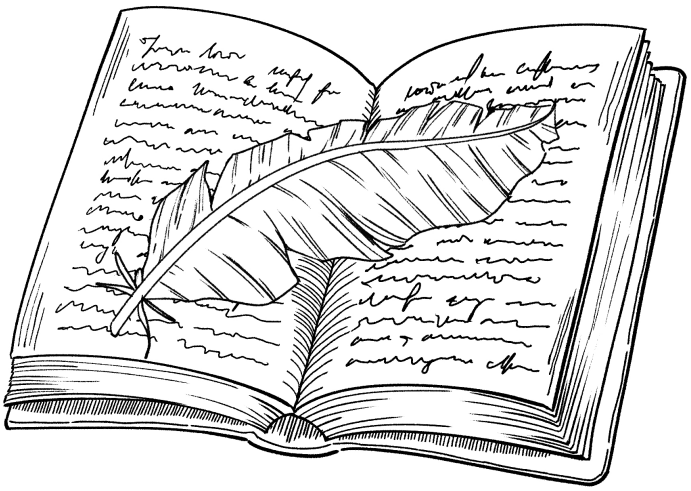
Red chirped in what Max interpreted as protest, especially once it became clear that Nōwē was allowed to be down there. Nōwē was better about going where she wanted and leaving if she didn’t like it. She usually ended up on someone’s lap for a while, and then she eventually decided that they were all fools and there were better things for her to do. She liked to stalk around the basement and hopefully never find anything to kill.

The group was as ridiculous as ever—especially now that they were dealing with a dragon who was enamored with their human rogue. (Edward had rolled incredibly well, and Max wasn’t the only one trying not to think about the mechanics of that particular relationship.)

Saturday was weirdly busy—still with the back-to-school vibe, he supposed—and the half-dozenth time he caught Alex helping a customer, he disappeared into the storage closet, dug through an old box, and came out to thrust a shirt at them.

“If you’re going to act like an employee, you might as well be one.”

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Chapter Five

Max

Alex stared for a stunned moment, and then they beamed at him, the biggest smile Max had ever seen.

They tugged the shirt on, flipped their hair out of the way, and looked down at it. “I can embellish it, right?”

The shirt was white with the logo and name of the store across the chest.

Max shrugged. “Sure. People need to see the name of the store, and I’d like it to be obvious you’re an employee. Nothing rude or potentially offensive. Pronouns, pride, or anything like that is always welcome. And people are usually good here, but if anyone ever gives you grief over any of that, you have my permission to kick them out, or get me, and I’ll kick them out.”

Thankfully, they were in a pretty accepting area in a pretty accepting state, but there were jerks everywhere.

Alex nodded. “Sounds good.”

“Oh, and at the end of the day today, we should probably look at paperwork.” Max made a face. “I don’t actually know your last name.”

Or how old they were.

Alex just nodded again. “Sure thing.”

And then they were off to help another customer.

Max wouldn’t have pegged them as a people person, but maybe they just needed to be in the zone or feel like they had a task.

Whatever. The important thing was that it meant Max could *not* deal with people, and he was all for that.

At six, Max closed the door and flipped the sign over. He'd found all the forms online and printed them out on his old printer—it worked fine, Evie, so why replace it?—and went through them with Alex. It turned out Alex wasn't their legal name, but Max put legal name where he had to and preferred name everywhere else.

Alex was also only fifteen.

"Mom asked me to wait to change my name until I turned eighteen," Alex told him. "She said if I was still sure, she'd pay for it and help me through the whole process."

"I'll always call you whatever name you prefer," Max assured them.

Red chirped from his shoulder, and Max chose to interpret it as agreement with the sentiment. The spell he'd used so Red wouldn't be noticeable didn't work on people who already knew about the object on which the spell had been cast. Only badly written spells of this type didn't at least make sure the caster could still notice the object. The caster being able to let others know worked well for things like family heirlooms.

Alex smiled at Max. "Thanks."

"Now," Max said with a nod, "while you seem to like being here all the time, there are rules about how many hours a fifteen-year-old can work, and we're obeying them." Max had refreshed on *all* the laws surrounding employing teens. "I don't want the work you're doing here to negatively impact any other aspects of your life."

Alex waved this aside. "It's fine."

"We're still following the rules," Max told them a bit sternly. "If you want to hang out here at other times like you've been doing, I won't stop you, but you really need to not work then, alright?"

"Fine," Alex agreed, seeming a little mollified that Max wasn't kicking them out—but Max was definitely going to need to keep an eye on them.

"I'm not great at some social cues," Max continued, "so I'm just going to be blunt. Would you like me to schedule you here on as many days as possible? Do you have somewhere else safe to go?"

Alex sighed. "My mom's a nurse. She does shift work. I'm old enough to stay home alone, and she knows that, but she worries anyway. I… might have implied that I had somewhere to go so she wouldn't be stressed about it."

Max felt like there was more to it than that, but Alex didn't owe Max their life story.

"Okay, so if you want to be here every day after school, that's fine, but if you realize at some point that it's gotten annoying, just let me know, and

we'll figure something else out. Just come whenever you finish—and do not *ever* cut school to be here, because then I'll have to tell your mother that I'm blighting your future, and I'll probably say something rude without realizing it, and your mother will tell me off and maybe threaten a restraining order, and then you'll never be able to come by the shop again."

Alex snorted. "That escalated quickly. Once a month, we have an early release. It's on a Wednesday, and we get off at 1:30."

"Okay, remind me, because I'm totally going to forget, but if you want to come in that day for two or whatever, I'm good with that. If you'd like some time on your own, or you have other things you need to do, that's not a problem. Whatever works for you."

Alex eyed him strangely for a moment and then pointed out, "You know you should hire employees who actually meet your business needs, right?"

Max shrugged. "Eh. My sister has been after me forever to hire someone to help. Threatened to do it herself the next time she visits from California. You're way better than that."

Alex scoffed, but they were smiling. "Wow. Thanks."

Grinning, Max said, "Anytime. Seriously, though, if you're here, it means I can work more on the private orders I get. I, uh, hunt down rare books for more serious collectors."

That was the best lie Max could come up with on the spot. Belatedly, he remembered that it was why he hadn't wanted to hire a normal person. But Alex seemed like a cool kid, and they clearly needed to fill their time. Max was just going with it. He'd figure everything else out after.

Red rubbed against his neck again, and Max reached up to give them a little pat with two fingers. *Was* this his possible-familiar giving him support? Or was this just a bird who liked humans liking humans?

Max cleared his throat. "So, seriously, if you come in and deal with people, then I don't have to deal with them, and I'm all for that."

"Your customer service skills are truly legendary," Alex told him dryly.

Max rolled his eyes. "Yeah, whatever, they can go somewhere else if they don't like it here." But he should probably be imparting more usable wisdom to his new employee. "I mean, don't be too rude, don't yell at people unless they yell at you first and you're really provoked, and remember what I said about telling them off if they're assholes. And try to tell them about books if they ask."

Alex's lips were pressed together, and it looked like they were trying really hard not to laugh. "Got it."

Max cleared his throat and just kept going. He was on a roll now, right? “Like I said, you’re welcome any time after school gets out. You can’t work past 7pm during the school year, so you’ll finish an hour before closing if you’re in on Thursdays and Fridays. I think you should have Sundays off, and since you can work up to 18 hours during the week, let’s put it at a 4-hour shift on Saturdays, maybe noon to four or so, since that’s usually when we’re busier. Does that make sense?”

Alex nodded.

Max continued. “If you need off for studying or clubs or friends or whatever, just let me know. Try to give me notice if you’re sick—please don’t share your germs.”

“Got it,” Alex said, still looking amused. “You want my number?”

Right, yes, that made it easier to contact one another.

Max added, “Monday’s usually a quieter day, so if you come in for 3:30, I’ll show you the computer and payment machine. There’s sometimes work stocking the shelves or sorting boxes that came in, and there’s a bit of cleaning, though I take care of most of that.” With cleaning charms, because who wanted to fight with dust? “And helping the customers, of course, by being friendly and approachable and informative.”

There, that sounded like something Evie would say.

Alex was nodding their head. “Uh huh.”

“Any questions?” Max asked. “I’m sure I’ve forgotten tons of stuff.”

“I think that’s it for now.” Alex fidgeted for a second and then said, “Thanks for this. This was, uh, one of the first shops I saw with a pride flag. And I like books. It felt like a safe space.”

Max nodded, throat getting a little thick for no reason at all. “I’m glad.”



The next morning, Max woke to multiple texts from Alex.

ALEX

I’m really sorry, but my mom wants to meet you.

I guess to make sure you’re not a creepy predator?

Like, she wasn’t asking all these questions before, but suddenly it’s weird now.

I know you don’t open until 11, but she’s gotta go in for a shift and wants to know if she can stop by at 9am.

I had to tell her like twelve times that I’ve never been to your apartment and I just hang out in the bookstore.

I told her to stop being weird, but it didn’t help.

Max huffed a laugh.

“Honestly,” he told Red and Nōwē, “while it’s a bit embarrassing, I’m glad Alex’s mom is looking out for them. For all she knows, I *could* be creepy.”

He texted Alex back to confirm that it was fine to meet, then he showered and dressed in jeans and a t-shirt that wasn’t too punny. He made sure that Nōwē and Red had food, then left Nōwē in the apartment as he headed downstairs to the shop. You could get to his apartment *from* the shop, but he wouldn’t be emphasizing that with Alex’s mom. He always locked the apartment, even when he was just downstairs. (He had wards, too, but it wasn’t like he could explain that to a normal person.)

Reminding himself that he needed to be totally normal probably wasn’t going to help the situation… but Max reminded himself that he needed to be totally normal anyway. Red rubbed against his neck, like they knew he needed some encouragement. He petted them—and then reminded himself that he shouldn’t do that while Alex’s mom was there.

Yeah, this was going to be great.

At five minutes to nine, a petite brunette who couldn’t have looked less like Alex showed up with their child in tow. Alex looked entirely sheepish and resigned the way that only a fifteen-year-old could.

(Max wanted to tell them to cherish every single moment—but he had no idea what the situation with Alex's other parent was, or their life in general. So he'd swallow any unsolicited advice, even if his heart ached a little, remembering when he'd been fifteen and maybe hadn't appreciated his parents as much as he should have.)

There was a brief diversion as their mom admired the window that Alex had decorated, and Max liked how appreciative she was even though her focus was mostly on Max.

He pulled open the door and ushered Alex and their mom in.

"Hello. I'm Maximilian March." Because his parents, god rest their souls, had hated him. "But please call me Max."

He offered his hand, and she shook it. There was no magical recognition buzzing along his skin. Definitely a normal person, just like their son.

"Natalie Rodriguez. I'm sure you understand my concerns."

She had dark brown eyes like her child. Right now, they were narrowed and looking at Max very intently.

"Mom!" Alex protested.

"Absolutely," Max said firmly. "You can't be too careful these days. Alex likes the bookshop, and my sister's been nagging me to get some help. It seemed like we might be able to kill two birds with one stone. I don't know how to say I'm not interested in kids without just saying I'm not interested in kids, so, uh, I'm apparently just going to say that."

Alex looked at him like he was a fool, but thankfully, Max's awkwardness seemed to reassure Alex's mother.

"I don't really like people, generally," Max added, "and I've never really understood the whole 'attraction' thing. Like, what's so great about sex, anyway?"

Alex stifled a laugh behind their hand. Even their mom looked faintly amused.

Max cleared his throat. "Which is probably not something you really needed to know about me. Sorry. I'm 38, which does, appallingly, mean I'm technically old enough for your child to be my child." He and Alex made identical horrified faces. "I made sure to look up all the rules regarding employing minors, and Alex has already said they'll let me know whenever they need time off. I do research for clients, so if Alex is working up front, I can do more of that. But I've been managing for years working around that obligation, so if I need to keep doing that, I can. Alex's schooling comes first,

and I should have plenty of flexibility to make that work. If you ever have any concerns, you can reach out to me, and we can discuss it."

Max thought that speech might have got away from him a little, but whatever, he'd said what he was trying to say. Oh, almost.

"The bookshop is a safe space, and I won't tolerate any bigoted behavior by anyone. Alex has my permission to protect themself, and I'm happy to throw anyone out. I've never had an issue with a customer before, but I'm a cis white man, so I've got a boatload of privilege that means my experience is probably very different from Alex's. But I swear I won't take any shit from anyone, and Alex's safety is my top priority."

He probably wasn't supposed to say "shit" in front of Alex's mom, but it was out there now.

She continued to look at him for another long moment, and then she gave a very firm nod. "Alright. It seems like we're on the same page. I reserve the right to stop by whenever."

"You're always welcome," Max confirmed.

"Mom, I don't need you to check up on me!" Alex protested.

Their mom shot them a look. "Alex, you could be sixty, and you'd still be my baby. I'm always going to want to protect you; that's just how parenting works."

Alex huffed a breath. "Ugh, you're the worst. Go away so you're not late for work."

But they gave their mom a hug, and Max was glad to see how much they cared for one another.

Alex's mom hurried off to the car, and Max eyed Alex.

"You want to go have breakfast? I assume your mom would freak out if we had it up in my apartment—and I've really only got cereal—but we could go out. We could alternate between staring awkwardly and asking one another asinine coworker getting-to-know-you questions."

Alex snorted. "Yeah, that sounds good."

"Let me get my jacket."

October was around the corner, and mornings were starting to get a bit chilly.

"Do you want to come with me?" Max asked Red. "You'd need to keep quiet. Normal people frown on strange animals, especially when they mix with food."

Red chirped and rubbed against his neck again. That was good enough for Max.

Shrugging into the jacket, he met Alex downstairs, locked up, and then they took off on foot towards the nearest diner that did a full breakfast, agreeing that if they wanted granola, they could get that at home.

Max might be the king of simple sandwiches, but if he was going to bother to eat out, it was going to be food he couldn't easily make himself.

It wasn't more than a few minutes before they were seated at a booth with plastic menus to peruse. The diner looked like it was lost in the 60s and smelled like coffee, fried foods, and an underlying sweetness. Syrup, probably. Max knew for a fact that they had excellent breakfast foods.

The server brought Max coffee. Thankfully, Alex declined before Max had to figure out if fifteen-year-olds should have caffeine. When had his parents let him start drinking it? He couldn't quite remember.

They wanted orange juice, and that was perfectly safe, as far as Max was aware.

"Get whatever you want," Max instructed. "It's like an employee bonding experience or something."

Alex squinted at him. "Have you ever had an employee before? How worried should I be?"

Max tilted his hand back and forth. "Eh. Sort of? When my parents ran the shop, my sister and I helped out all the time. They were killed in a car accident when I was twenty-four. I took over the shop, and my sister worked with me until she went away to university. She came back a couple summers to help out. She's one of those weird people who loves people and actually wants to talk to them and stuff, so she was good at the customer service part."

Alex smirked. "Whereas you'd like the customers to just leave you alone, right?"

Max groaned. "So much. Seriously. I don't understand why they have to bother me so much."

Looking like they were trying not to laugh outright, Alex asked, "Have you considered that you might be in the wrong line of work?"

"But the books are awesome!" Max protested, wishing that he could tell Alex all about the spellbooks and the research he did.

Unfortunately, there were strict rules about telling normal people about magic, and it basically came down to marriage, family, and long-term commitment. There *were* spells that could fully remove the memories of shifters and witches and specific events from a normal person, as opposed to the… soft adjustment of the World Spell. But messing with people's minds could be dangerous, and there was no saying exactly what other details might

be lost that had been connected to the memories that were removed. Those spells were therefore highly regulated, and you could get into a lot of trouble for using them.

Max wanting to make his own life easier was definitely not a reason to reveal anything to Alex—who seemed like a great kid, but would likely be heading off to university and their own actual life in a couple of years. The Council would throw the book at Max if he even thought about it.

Max shrugged and added, "I acknowledge that people are still necessary at the current time to make the shop successful enough that I can keep buying books and researching for my clients. I'm open to that changing, that's all."

Their server came back, and they paused to order. Max got a spinach and mushroom omelet with extra cheese and a short stack of pancakes. Alex got the full breakfast—eggs, bacon, sausage, breakfast potatoes—and waffles.

Max admired their desire to tackle *all* the breakfast foods.

And then they were left staring at one another. Apparently, it was awkward silence after all.

"Ugh," Max groaned. "I'm terrible at this. I'm thirty-eight—I think I told your mom that already—and I've lived here my whole life. I've run the bookshop since my parents died. I don't like people. I do like books. Nōwē, my cat, tolerates me, and we've already clarified that if she trips me and kills me, she'll eat my eyeballs."

Thankfully, Alex looked amused at this. "Got it. So if I show up after school one day and you're not open, I should expect an eyeless corpse?"

Oh, thank god. They had a similar sense of humor.

"It's extremely likely," Max agreed. "And, I mean, if I'm dead, it's not like I'd need my eyeballs. I wouldn't want Nōwē to starve."

"And your sister would come get Nōwē?" Alex asked.

Huh.

"You know," Max mused, "we've never talked about it, but she'd better."

Max pulled out his phone and shot off a quick text.

MAX

You'd take care of Nōwē if anything happened to me, right?

Hypothetical question in case my new employee finds me dead at the bottom of the stairs because Nōwē has finally succeeded in tripping me.

He didn’t get an immediate response because it was barely six in California, and it was a Sunday, so Evie wasn’t working. Maybe he should have tried to make the surprise even better, but honestly, he just wanted her to stop whatever she had planned for when she came to visit him after Christmas. This way, he was employing someone he actually liked, and there was no way that Evie could try to matchmake, because his employee was a kid.

Wins all round.

He looked back up at Alex, realizing he’d kind of… lapsed.

“Sorry, I was just checking in with my sister. She lives in California, so she’s not awake yet. Otherwise, she’d probably already have called, all excited that I have an employee.”

Alex still looked amused. “Is it that exciting?”

“She thinks I work too hard. And I’ve kind of avoided it for years.”

“Why *did* you give me a job?” Alex wanted to know.

Max shrugged. “I don’t know. It felt like the right thing to do? A bit like I needed you and maybe you needed me? But not in a creepy way.”

“Yeah, don’t worry, you’re not my type,” Alex assured him.

Max briefly considered asking what their type was, but while he didn’t much care for propriety or lines, he thought maybe it would be best to not get into that with his fifteen-year-old employee. As long as they had no interest in Max, that was all he cared about.

Max cleared his throat. “So, yeah, I like books. I like finding old books and having people appreciate all the great books that can find a new home and be of use to someone.” How to translate what else he did? “I like finding information for clients that they might not have found otherwise. I don’t like people who leave sticky fingerprints on books, dog-ear pages, or break spines. Children who love a book to death are an exception. I try to shop local when I can since I want people to shop local with me. I will never be able to compete with big box stores or online retailers, but I serve a niche market. I just… don’t really want to interact with that market unless I have to.”

Alex chuckled, their eyes twinkling. “Got it. So when I’m working, I deal with people whenever possible so that you don’t have to, allowing you to maintain a viable business.”

“Pretty much,” Max agreed, glad they got it. “Like I said, that’ll give me more time with the research, and that’s my happy place.” He made a face. “I mean, sometimes the people who want that information can be jerks, too, but

I don’t usually deal with them face-to-face, and they’re welcome to take their business elsewhere if they don’t like how I work.”

“You should really give customer service talks,” Alex said with mock-admiration. “You’re so inspiring.”

Max snorted. “Hey, I don’t want to give you a false impression of what to expect. I don’t believe in being unnecessarily rude, but if a customer is rude to you or me? I will one hundred percent be rude back. And when a customer is wrong, I will tell them so.”

“I believe you,” Alex said, eyes still alight with amusement.

“It’s just—” Max tried to figure out what he wanted to say. “People can be totally fine. One on one, with the right person, they can be perfectly pleasant. But collectively? People can be kind of awful. And customers can be *the worst*. When people are entitled, they often exhibit incredibly bad behavior. And really, it’s just us, you know? We’re the beings that do this. With animals, their behavior is all open. They’re honest and never hiding anything. I admire that a lot.”

Without thinking, he raised a hand to caress Red, who chirped, but quietly, rustling their feathers slightly. It hadn’t occurred to Max until just now how awkward it was that Alex could see Red and might wonder why no one else in the restaurant was commenting on the bird on his shoulder. He lowered his hand again. He’d just… brazen through it at this point, he supposed.

“Unfortunately,” he said, trying to sound normal, “animals can’t read books.”

Alex laughed, and Max was saved from needing to say anything else as their server brought their food. They spent a few minutes just eating and then did actually go through a few of those getting-to-know-you topics.

Alex was glad to have moved here. They’d left a couple friends behind, but Max didn’t have to read between the lines much to see that they were safer and happier here, even if they liked to come hang out at a bookstore after school.

As Max had already learned, they were very artistic, and they were thinking about going to school for fine arts. Their mom was supportive but had also made them aware of the difficulties for any kind of artist to try to make a living off their work, so Alex was still considering their options. They hadn’t worked out what else they might want to do—except they were sure they didn’t want to be a nurse like their mom.

“Too many bodily fluids,” they said with a shudder.

Yeah, Max was with them on that one.

In addition to books, Alex liked pop music—and had apparently gotten teased about it in the past—hiking, strength training, and old cars. Their favorite genre was mystery, but they also liked romance, science fiction, and some fantasy. They preferred books with queer content, though they didn't think there was enough with non-binary representation.

Max didn't disagree, but he made a mental note to search out more. (If occasionally his queer section included books Max had recently purchased, no one need ever know. After all, once he passed it on to his bookstore, it was secondhand, right?)

It was a weirdly pleasant meal—or maybe that was just the fact that Max couldn't think of the last time he'd had food with another person who wasn't his sister when she came on holiday and insisted on them spending time together. (He loved her, but she was *such* an extrovert.)

"This was employee orientation," Max explained as he insisted on paying for both of them. "Honestly, it's probably the best you're going to get. You'll have to remind me of all the things I actually need to teach you. I've been running around in the bookshop since before I could read, so I really just osmosed everything I needed to know."

"Got it," Alex said, not sounding worried. "I'll ask questions when I need to."

They parted ways outside the diner, Alex insisting that they didn't live far away, just a ten-minute walk past the school.

"I know I said no work on Sundays, but if you want to hang out, that's fine. With the bookshop, obviously, not with me," Max clarified.

Alex smiled but shook their head. "Nah, I got some homework I should do. I'll see you tomorrow, though—once I finish school. There will be no skipping and embarking on a life of crime that can be traced directly back to you."

"Great," Max said, admiring the cheek. "I'm probably a bad influence in a lot of ways, but I'd prefer it not to be academically."

Alex waved and headed off, and Max wandered back to the bookshop, feeling weirdly optimistic. He hadn't *meant* to hire someone, and he was pretty sure a part-timer who was only fifteen wasn't at all what Evie had meant, but he couldn't shake the feeling that this was going to work out, that it was maybe happening… exactly like it was supposed to.

(Max had never bought into any sort of divination, knowing full well that no such spells existed, and so being incredibly skeptical of any claims to the contrary. But still, he felt… something.)

Red’s little feet clenched and unclenched on his shoulder as they shifted back and forth, seeming agitated. Max reached up to stroke their feathers.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he soothed. “I’ll get you some seeds and water as soon as we get back, okay?”

Red and Nōwē had eaten before Max left, but he hadn’t given them much time. Maybe Red hadn’t had enough.

He unlocked the door to the bookshop, stepped through, and closed and locked it behind him. He’d have to open soon, but he wanted to make sure that Red was comfortable first. They seemed distinctly *un*comfortable now, still chirping and shifting.

They hadn’t left, though, so hopefully it wasn’t anything too serious.

Max hurried upstairs and let them into his apartment. Nōwē made her displeasure known that he had abandoned her there.

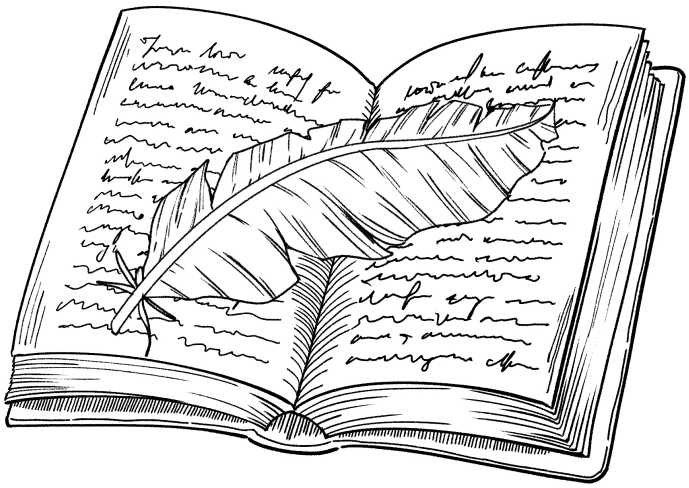
“I know; your life is so hard,” he commiserated as he walked into the kitchen area. “You have food and toys and blankets and cat trees and a whole apartment to hang about in with no responsibilities whatsoever.”

Nōwē meowed loudly at him. Red’s feathers rustled louder. Max refilled Red’s dishes of seeds and water. Red fluttered down, but they didn’t eat or drink. They kept hopping around, half-flying, half-walking along the island.

“What’s the matter?” Max asked, really beginning to worry.

They hopped off the island, flying down to the ground… where they transformed into a man. A very *naked* man.

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Chapter Six

Rory

"I'm sorry!" Rory said, as soon as he had human vocal cords that his mate could actually understand. "I didn't think of this as hiding anything. Because I'm still me as a bird, you know? Just like I'm me as a human. So it didn't occur to me that you might consider it hiding or that I was keeping anything from you. But when you talked about animals being honest, I realized it might not seem the same way to you. Are you angry?"

He looked at Max beseechingly. His mate was staring at him with a shocked expression. From his new human perspective, Rory could see that Max was only a couple of inches taller than he was. His nose really was a bit too big, but Rory thought it gave him character. His hair was dark and a bit shaggy. He was broader in the chest and looked stronger than Rory—although in Rory's case, that was deceptive. Shifters were generally stronger than witches or normal people, and mythical shifters were stronger still, since their strength didn't come solely from muscle but also from magic.

Rory liked everything about Max.

"Why are you *naked*?" Max suddenly burst out. "Clothes shift with shifters! It's magic! Everyone knows that!"

Rory looked down at himself and then back up again.

“Ah,” he said blankly. “I kind of forgot that I wasn’t wearing clothes the last time I shifted.” He’d been recently reborn, and clothes did *not* survive his burning. He cleared his throat and tried a winning smile. “Did you know that shifters are always naked when they’re in their animal form? So it often seems quite normal… maybe more normal than it does for witches and normal people?”

There was zero appreciation in Max’s eyes, but based on other things he’d said, this didn’t surprise Rory. He was pretty sure his mate was on the ace spectrum, which was totally fine. Rory liked sex, but not more than he liked his mate. He’d much rather get to know the person the Magic had thought could be his ideal partner.

Unlike witches and normal people who’d grown completely out of touch with the Magic, Rory trusted it and his instincts. He went where he was guided… but that didn’t mean he couldn’t still make a total muff of his first human impression.

Nōwē took the opportunity to meow at him and come over and begin to coil around his legs, marking him. There was a lot more of him to mark in this form. He leaned down and began to pet her. Hands were very good for petting.

“I don’t suppose I could trouble you for some clothing?” he asked carefully. “I would go buy some, but I don’t have any money on me, and I’m pretty sure the shop proprietors would not be delighted by my appearance.”

Thankfully, this made Max snort an amused sound. “Yeah, no, let’s not add an arrest to an already weird day. Uh, hold on, let me see if I can find something that will fit you.”

Max disappeared into the bedroom, and Rory stayed where he was, not sure if he was still allowed to make himself welcome, even though he’d spent days flying around the apartment and hanging out on Max’s shoulder.

The witch returned a few moments later with a little folded stack of clothes.

“I think these will work. I need to open the store shortly, but we can go get you some other clothes afterwards. You can change in the bathroom. And take a shower if you want.” A ghost of a smile crossed his face. “I don’t know how well those saucer baths worked.”

Rory grinned at him. “They were the best! Thank you! Human me likes hot showers, but bird me loves bird baths.”

In the bathroom, Rory set the clothes on the little counter, figured out how to work the shower, and climbed in. He spent several minutes reacquainting himself with how his human limbs worked. Thankfully, it really was mostly instinct in both directions, but there was an adjustment period if it had been a while.

Rory didn't let himself stay under the water for long—even though the hot water was glorious—because he didn't want Max to be late for work. His mate had only known Rory was human for a few minutes, and that was too soon for him to have formed much of an opinion on him. (Rory was Rory no matter what, but witches didn't always grasp that right away. He supposed it was very different if you only had one self.)

He turned the water off, stepped out of the shower, and allowed flame to flicker over his body until he was perfectly dry once more. He tugged on the clothing that Max had left for him: a t-shirt that said "Meh." and sweatpants. The pants were too big, but they had a tie at their waist, so Rory was able to secure them. He rolled up the hems twice.

The mirror was foggy, so he wiped at it with his hand and then looked at himself. His white blond hair was flying in all directions, but it generally did that, so he didn't make more than a cursory effort to smooth it. His eyes were bright, like amber or honey. He wasn't sure how old he looked. He'd never totally understood human ages, though he supposed that when your lives were short, you wanted to measure and make every moment count.

Rory wanted to make every moment count with Max, though, and that wasn't going to happen in the bathroom!

He grinned at himself and then ventured out into the main area of the apartment. Max was on his phone, but he looked up when Rory emerged from the bathroom in a puff of steam.

"I forgot today was Sunday," Max said.

Rory blinked at him, unsure why this was important.

"I was going to take you to this great thrift store I know," Max explained, "but they close at five on Sundays like I do. We can go to one of the bigger stores. There are a few places that are open later."

Rory had already heard Max's opinion on big box stores compared to small, independently owned businesses.

"Could we go tomorrow before you open instead? Would that work?" Rory asked.

Max blinked at him, looking taken aback for a moment, and then he agreed, “Yeah, that would work. You’re sure you don’t mind waiting?”

“You’re sure you don’t mind me borrowing your clothes that long?” Rory countered.

Max smiled. “Nah, you’re fine. Uh, did you want to stay up here?”

“Not really?” Rory admitted sheepishly. “I’d rather hang out with the books. The other books, I mean.”

Max’s apartment had multiple shelves full of books, but it couldn’t compete with an entire bookshop.

This made Max smile fully. “Come on, then.”

So Max, Rory, and Nōwē trooped out of the apartment and down to the shop, which Max duly opened.

As Rory had learned, Sundays usually started slow, and this proved to be true once again. Max checked his emails, and Rory couldn’t read them because while he’d had an excellent view perched on Max’s shoulder, it didn’t work as well as a person with his feet on the ground. Rory was aware that Max wasn’t a people person—and right now, Rory was a people.

Max had agreed to let Alex come and work at the shop, though, so he wasn’t *categorically* opposed to people. Rory needed to figure out how to be a useful person, or at least non-objectionable. He wasn’t going to ask Max for any unreasonable spells or ruin any books. But what else could he do to make it clear that he was a good type of person instead of a bad one?

He should probably not hover.

Rory wandered around the bookshop, taking it all in from his new perspective. He was much taller as a human, but he couldn’t fly around like a bird, which meant he lost some of his previous vantage points. There were shelves everywhere, and now that he was stuck walking on the floor, he couldn’t easily see over them. But he could actually pick the books up now and read them, which was a definite advantage.

He liked to see what humans were writing. They were very creative. He wondered which of them were actually witches or shifters posing as normal humans and integrating into a regular life. Most witches and shifters did so to a degree, but were there those who abandoned that other part of themselves entirely to pose as a normal human?

Not being a bird again was impossible for Rory to imagine; he didn’t think he’d be very good at pretending that part of him didn’t exist—but he *did* sometimes live as one or the other for years at a time, depending on the

situation. Maybe it wasn't so different for the others. If you gained acceptance and safety, was it worth hiding part of yourself?

He found a whole shelf of queer fiction, which delighted him. Over the centuries, he'd sometimes found it proudly displayed, and at other times, it had been completely forbidden. He was glad that they'd arrived at another time where it was encouraged, at least in some places. Max had made more than plain that he was very accepting—and wouldn't tolerate people who weren't.

The bell at the door jangled, and Rory peeked around the shelves to see that a family had walked in, what looked like a mother, father, young girl, and baby the father was wearing in a pouch on their chest. (Humans were very clever in some of their inventions. Also, sometimes terrible. But they made good things, too.)

"Hello, Mr. Max!" the young girl said cheerfully.

"Hello," Max said, staring gravely down at her. "Did your friend like their books?"

"They loved them!" the little girl declared with rapturous enthusiasm. "Now I'm here to get a book to read to my brother." She pointed at the baby and then leaned closer to confide to Max, "Did you know babies *can't read*? So I'll have to do it for him until he learns."

Max nodded very seriously, though Rory could see the amusement at the corner of his lips. "That's very generous of you. You make an excellent big sister."

If she'd had feathers, the little girl would have puffed up as round as a robin. She grabbed up her dad's hand and tugged.

"Come on! We gotta go see what he likes!"

The dad allowed himself to be led, and Rory wondered idly how she was going to assess her brother's acceptance of the books in question. What constituted approval?

The mother, who offered Max a tired smile, headed off towards the mysteries.

The bell jangled again, and this time it was an older woman. She wanted romances, and she also wanted to talk to Max about his opinion on them, which Rory could see he wasn't very comfortable with. Rory didn't think it was that they were romances but that the conversation wasn't serving directly to help Max find a book for her. It was more like *chatting*, which Max didn't seem to be the best at.

So Rory swooped in. “You know, it’s been several years since I last read a romance,” he confessed. “But one of my favorite tropes—is that the right word?—is that one where the two main characters are stuck together.”

The woman’s face lit up, the skin crinkling around her eyes as they twinkled at him. She nodded vigorously. “Forced proximity! Who doesn’t enjoy being snowed in with a stranger and needing to share body heat for warmth?”

Max looked appalled. “Why would anyone want—?”

Rory looped his arm through the nice lady’s and began to lead her towards the romance section. There were plenty of books there. This area did a brisk business. Lots were sold, but Max also got lots to sell. They were a *hot commodity*.

Rory said, “I always enjoy seeing how the author pulls it off, making it seem reasonable that strangers get close so quickly—or making us not care that it’s not reasonable.”

She laughed. “Yes, I think you need to bring a healthy dose of suspension of disbelief to many romance novels. But it’s nice to have a guaranteed happily ever after, so you know it’s going to end well even if the set-up is a bit ridiculous.” She patted his hand. “You know, I have six siblings, and when we were growing up, I shared a bed with my two sisters. From romance novels, you would think that no one had ever shared a bed platonically in the history of ever.”

Rory snorted. “Right? People seem to be overcome by their feelings when they really could have used self-control.”

She countered, “But when you know they’re going to get together, that they’re *meant* to get together, it seems inevitable that their feelings would get to them like that. It seems like the whole reason the power is out, they’re running out of wood, and they have to cuddle for warmth.”

Laughing, Rory agreed, “Exactly. What are you looking for today?”

She gazed at the shelf. “I’m not quite sure. Sometimes, I don’t know it until I see it. I know it’s a bit early for Christmas, but I do enjoy those cozy holiday romances.”

“Let’s see what we can find!” Rory said enthusiastically.

By the time Anabelle left with a half dozen different romances, the store had filled up with another handful of customers. Rory had missed the family leaving, but he trusted that they’d found appropriate reading material for the little girl and her baby brother.

Rory happily wandered around the store and started chatting with anyone he encountered, curious to know what they were there for as well as trying to help them find what they wanted if he could. He got into a protracted discussion about cookbooks and the best way to learn to cook, mysteries and whether true crime was creepy or not, atlases and whether or not they were being replaced by the internet, and the best resources for a friend who had a terrible boyfriend—but not, like, abusively bad, just kind of a jerk, only she didn't seem to see it.

Rory offered his advice whenever he could or simply listened. At one point, he half heard a phone conversation between Max and who Rory assumed was his sister as he talked about hiring Alex and explained why this was a purely business decision and she needed to stop thinking in terms of meet-cutes.

Sometimes, Rory wandered up to the cash with the customers, and if Max wasn't there, then Rory punched in the sale. Now that he had fingers, he could do that.

He had no idea where the time went, and he was taken aback when Max swung the open sign to closed.

"Oh," Rory said, looking outside. He couldn't see the sun given the proximity of the other buildings, but it was no longer overhead. "Is it time to close already?"

"Yes," Max said. "It's just after five."

"Did you have a good day?" Rory asked. "It's much easier for me to spend time with you when I'm perched on your shoulder."

Max spluttered a laugh. "Yes, I had a good day. You seem to be good at talking to people."

Rory beamed at him. "Yes, I love talking to people. It's always interesting to learn about their lives and where they come from and what they're looking for."

Max's lip curled up. "You're an extrovert, aren't you?"

Rory pondered this. "Oh, that's that test on the internet, isn't it? Where people get different letters and it tells them about themselves?"

Max laughed. "The Myers-Briggs personality test, yes. All of those sorts of tests are invented ways of categorizing people, but the labels can help people express what sort of personality they have or understand where others have differences. In the case of an introvert versus an extrovert, an introvert is drained by interactions with others. It doesn't mean they're

necessarily shy or don’t enjoy those interactions, but it tends to tire them. An extrovert, by contrast, is energized by people. They’re usually very good at customer service and people-centric jobs. They’re more likely to have lots of friends. But like I said, it’s just a way to think about it, and plenty of people are a mix of the two, or act more one way but behave differently in their work environment, and so on.”

Rory pondered this for another moment and then declared, “I’m definitely an extrovert. I love spending time with people, and you’re my favorite.”

Max blinked at him, looking taken aback by this. “I don’t think I’m anyone’s favorite person.”

“Incorrect,” Rory informed him helpfully, “since you’re mine.”

“You don’t know me very well,” Max pointed out.

“There’s plenty of time to fix that,” Rory enthused before a thought made him frown. “I mean, if you’re still okay with that. Like I said, I didn’t think about the fact that you thought I was just a bird.”

Max’s expression was a bit sardonic. “Honestly, the only thing I’m really surprised about is that you were okay being unable to talk for so long.”

Rory laughed. “Hey, I was talking plenty.”

Max’s lip curled up in clear amusement. “Yeah, sorry. I don’t speak bird.”

“You don’t seem to speak cat, either. There have been a few occasions where I’d be pretty worried about what Nōwē is saying.”

Max eyed him but was still smiling. “I got the gist. The fact that I feed her the good food is what keeps me in her good graces, and I’m well aware of it.”

Nōwē seemed to be quite affectionate towards Max overall, but she was definitely still a cat.

Rory’s stomach made a gurgling noise, and he clamped his hands over it. He’d almost forgotten how this body worked. It had been second nature to suppress the need to eat as a bird, but he hadn’t gotten into the habit of doing that in this much bigger form.

“I should have thought of lunch!” Max said, looking chagrined. “Sorry. With that big breakfast—that you didn’t get to eat—I didn’t even think about it. Uh, I don’t have a lot of food options.”

“I like PB&J,” Rory assured him.

Max looked taken aback for a moment and then seemed to recall that Rory was sometimes a bird and had seen what he’d been eating for the past few weeks.

“I should do some grocery shopping anyway,” Max admitted. “You want to come?”

Rory perked up. “Yes, please.”

It had been a while since he’d gone shopping, and he was sure that he would enjoy the experience with Max.

Once the shop was closed up tight—and Nōwē fed so that she wouldn’t stage a rebellion or plan an assassination—Max gathered up reusable bags, dug through his closet to produce a coat that Rory could wear, and then they set off on foot.

As they walked, Max explained, “I don’t usually get a ton at once, and then occasionally I’ll take the car so that I can really stock up on the essentials.”

“That makes sense.”

If Rory’s life had taught him anything, it was how ephemeral *things* were. You didn’t usually get to keep them, so Rory didn’t form attachments to them.

The store turned out to be all of fifteen minutes away and was open until 6pm on Sundays according to the sign on the door. They only had to fill Max’s reusable bags, so they should have enough time.

Max pulled a cart out of the mass that were connected together and set his bags in the top section.

“Pick out anything that interests you,” he told Rory.

Rory took Max at his word, and soon the cart was filled with a pineapple, an artichoke, extra spicy salsa, three different kinds of cheese, a tub of mixed nuts, hot sauce, and ice cream sandwiches.

“You like sandwiches!” Rory pointed out gleefully.

Max’s eyes crinkled up in the corners. “Yes, I do.”

Rory enjoyed all the colorful packaging. Max watched him with bemusement.

“When’s the last time you went shopping?” Max asked.

Rory stopped to consider this. “Uh, it’s been a while. I don’t always pay that much attention to time, but I don’t think I was a bird for more than, like, ten years at the most?”

Max dropped the can he’d been looking at, and Rory chased after it when it rolled away. Max was still staring when he brought it back.

“You were a bird for *ten years*?” he repeated, sounding totally shocked.

“Well, I think it was probably less than that,” Rory said conscientiously. “I guess I should have been paying closer attention.”

He knew that dates were important to mortals. He noticed sometimes. But sometimes, time just sort of… happened.

“Ten years,” Max muttered. “Holy shit. Uh, is there someone you want to contact?”

Rory didn’t immediately make the connection, and then he shook his head. “Oh, no, it’s just me. There was a fire before, and then it was just me.”

He’d set the fire, technically, and his rebirth had been in exchange for the lives he’d saved when he’d done it, the people he’d rescued who wouldn’t have survived otherwise. But he wasn’t supposed to share all that yet. Max hadn’t accepted him as his mate.

Max’s expression had gone sad. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Rory looked up into his serious face. “Sometimes it’s hard, but I’ve mostly gotten used to it. It’s why I was so excited to find you.”

“Find me?” Max said.

Rory nodded. He made a face. “That’s why I ran into the window. I’m really sorry about that! I promise I’m usually way more aware of my surroundings and in control of myself, but I just looked over, and there you were, and I was so shocked, and the bird instincts took over, and that meant ‘splat.’”

“But why would you be excited about finding me?” Max asked, still sounding confused.

“Because you’re my mate,” Rory told him.

Max drew back. “Whoa. Hold on. What are you talking about?”

Rory grimaced and asked anxiously, “Oh, should I not have said anything? I know most people don’t really have a connection with the Magic anymore and don’t notice. But I can tell. My connection to the Magic is very good.”

Max continued to stare at him like he wasn’t speaking a comprehensible language. Rory hadn’t lapsed into birdsong when he wasn’t paying attention, had he? But no, these human vocal cords wouldn’t be able to produce the correct sounds.

Max lowered his voice. “You think *magic* brought us together?”

He sounded very skeptical.

Rory tilted his head back and forth. “Kind of? Not like a spell or something. But the bigger magic, the magic that fills the whole world and makes shifters and witches. That magic. I always think of it as having a capital, though that probably doesn’t help much with your understanding.”

Max huffed a breath. “Capitalization isn’t really my biggest concern right now, no. This probably isn’t a conversation we should be having at the grocery store. Let’s finish shopping, and we can talk about it at home, okay?”

Rory agreed to that immediately, though he was quite sure now that he shouldn’t have mentioned anything yet. He didn’t always gauge that right. It was why the mythical shifters had agreed amongst themselves not to tell anyone about themselves except their mate—once that mate accepted them. Now that he was faced with his mate, he began to understand that was more complicated than it seemed. How could his mate accept him if he didn’t know the truth? But Rory wasn’t supposed to tell the truth unless he was certain his mate would accept him.

At this point, Max doubted the whole idea, so Rory was clearly not supposed to share more. When should he proceed, though?

He supposed he was going to find out.

Max drew his attention back to the cart. “When you look at these foods, do you envision a meal of any kind?”

Rory stared at them. “Well, I think about eating them all. That’s a meal, right?”

Max smiled faintly. “Sort of. But unless you want to dip the pineapple in the salsa, you’re missing a few key ingredients. Come on.”

Rory would be willing to try pineapple dipped in salsa, but by the time Max had finished marching up and down the grocery aisles, there were chips to go with the salsa, crackers for the cheese, strawberries and grapes to go with the pineapple, a spicy chicken curry with a side of vegetables, rice, naan, pasta and tomato sauce, special bread with garlic on it, potatoes and steak with a “spice rub,” more sandwich bread and peanut butter, a small piece of fish, and—

Max held up the artichoke. “Do you actually like artichokes?”

Rory smiled. “I like the way they look.”

“Uh huh,” Max said, looking like he was trying not to smile. “But if we take it home, are you going to cook it and actually eat it?”

Rory considered this seriously and then shook his head.

Max hesitated. “Do you want it anyway?”

“No, that’s okay,” Rory decided. “Better to leave it here for someone who’s actually going to eat it. It’s just silly when we let food go to waste.”

Max nodded and put the artichoke back. They then went to check out, and Rory marveled at the self-serve kiosks, where you got to scan everything yourself! As soon as Max saw how much Rory was enjoying it, he put Rory in charge, which was awesome. Rory liked the way it beeped and how it usually knew what the item was, but sometimes, you had to help it search.

“Yes!” Rory cried out when they successfully identified the yellow potatoes they were purchasing. He patted the machine. “Good job. You figured it out again.” He beamed at Max. “I like this game.”

Max looked bemused. “I’m glad. I think I can truthfully say that I’ve never had this much fun while grocery shopping.”

Rory beamed at him, because he definitely wanted Max to enjoy when they spent time together.

Max even let Rory tap his card to make the payment. Rory had already gotten used to that form of payment at the bookshop, but he’d never gotten to do it himself before.

He’d observed a lot as a bird, but it wasn’t quite the same as getting to do it himself. This was delightful.

Max insisted on taking two bags for himself, but he let Rory carry the third as they made their way back to the bookshop.

When Max let them into the apartment, Nōwē meowed at them, expressing her displeasure that they’d been off to procure food without her.

“They don’t like cats in the grocery store,” Max told her. “You know that.”

She screeched her outrage but was mollified by Max’s offering of the small piece of fish for her to eat.

Max was smart.

Rory helped Max put the food away in the fridge.

“I thought we could have the curry and rice tonight, since it’s ready-made. I should have asked first. Is that alright?” Max asked.

Rory nodded, his stomach choosing that moment to declare once more that it would like to be filled with food.

Max laughed. “Let me just pop it into the microwave and heat it up.”

A few minutes later, the apartment was full of delicious scents. Rory inhaled deeply, his stomach grumbling audibly once more.

“Why don’t you set the table?” Max suggested.

Rory did so. Max seemed to eat half his meals standing at his kitchen island, but he had a square wooden dining room table with four chairs, and Rory set out plates, cutlery, and glasses there. Then he filled the glasses with water. Once the microwave beeped, Max transferred the dishes to trivets in the middle of the table, and they sat down to eat.

Rory hummed in appreciation as he swallowed the first bite of curry. His bird forms were perfectly happy with the diet of that particular species of bird, but his human form had a distinct preference for spice: the spicier, the better.

Max’s eyes watered a bit when he ate the curry, but he just wiped the tears away and agreed that it had some kick to it.

They ate steadily for several minutes until Max said, “What makes you think that we’re, uh, meant to be together?”

Rory struggled with how to put it into words. “As far as I know, the Magic isn’t sentient, at least not the way that most of us would consider sentience. But it’s still a force upon the world, and sometimes, it feels to me like there’s a… a nudge, I guess you could call it, that directs me to a certain location. One of those nudges brought me here, and then I found you.”

“And what, you took one look at me and just *knew*?” It was clear what Max thought of that idea.

Rory shrugged. “Well, yes. I know most witches and shifters—never mind the normal people—have lost their connection with the Magic. They don’t feel it anymore.”

Rory wasn’t sure if everyone was still getting nudges they didn’t notice or understand or if nudges weren’t given very often anymore.

“But you think that you can feel those nudges.” Max’s attempt at neutrality wasn’t particularly good.

“I know I can,” Rory confirmed. “Most of my kind can. And most of us have been waiting for a long time to find our mates.”

“Is that why you stayed a bird so long?” Max asked.

Rory shook his head. “No, I get nudges no matter what. Sometimes it’s easier to travel in animal form. But sometimes, I think I need a bit of recovery time in bird form. Like if everything’s a bit traumatic, then it gives me a bit of space to reset.” He pondered this. “I’m a bird when I want to be a bird, and then I’m human when I want to be human. They’re all me, but at

different times, one might feel more right than the other. I really like talking to you."

This surprised a small smile out of Max. "I like talking to you, too. Surprisingly." His expression grew more serious. "But I'm not sure about this mate thing. I don't really believe in any sort of predestination or divination."

Rory nodded. "That's fair."

"Fated mates can't exist without it," Max argued.

Pondering this for a moment, Rory finally said, "I see what you mean. And obviously we're coming at this from different directions, but I do accept that magic is, well, magical."

"Of course magic is magical." Max was frowning, like that had nothing to do with anything.

"Well," Rory said slowly, "to me, that means that magic can sometimes know things that shifters and witches don't. And I'm not saying that there's some big master plan known by the universe or anything." Rory wasn't *not* saying that, though. "I think it's kind of unknowable, to be honest. But I do believe that the Magic is part of that, part of that bigger unknown. And my experience is that sometimes, it nudges people towards one another. It doesn't mean they automatically fall in love. It doesn't mean they have to stay together. It doesn't mean they don't have to work at a relationship or that they won't still find things that are annoying about one another."

Max huffed a breath, smiling faintly.

Rory smiled back and continued. "But there's a… strong possibility. It's like the Magic is giving a helping hand, and it's up to the two people to decide if they want to explore those possibilities. They might decide not to. They're still making all the choices."

Max looked a lot more relaxed now, and Rory was pretty sure he'd managed to address at least some of his concerns.

"I don't think I'd make a particularly good mate for anyone," Max said.

"Why not?" Rory asked.

Max grimaced. "Because I'm grumpy, I don't like people, and I don't understand why people want to get together anyway."

"You don't understand why people want to get together, or you don't understand why they want to have sex?"

Looking uncomfortable, Max nevertheless admitted, "Well, a bit of both, to be honest, but also, the latter."

“Sex is an integral part of a relationship for *some* people but not for everyone.”

Max looked at him skeptically, and his question was delivered flatly, “You don’t want to have sex?”

Rory shrugged. “I’ve been alive for a long time. I’ve had sex before. I’ve enjoyed it—because it was pleasant for me *and* my partner. If my partner doesn’t want to have sex, then I don’t want to have it, either. That would be the worst.”

Max still looked doubtful. “You’d just stop having sex?”

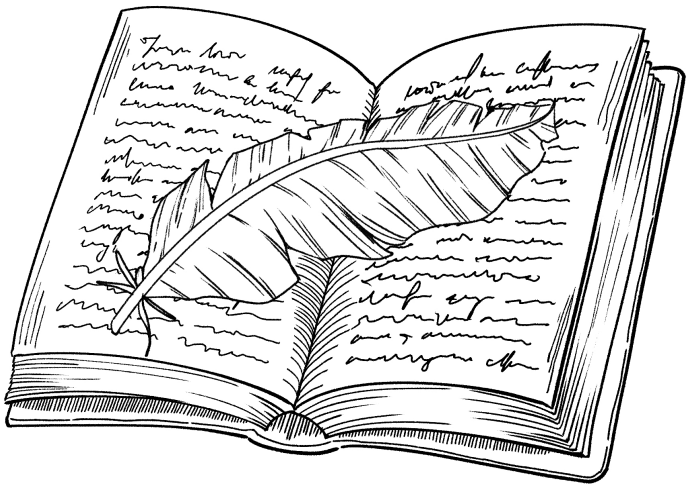
Rory nodded. “Yeah. I mean, I didn’t have sex for however long I was a bird, just as an example.”

This, thankfully, made Max laugh. “Oh, no little bird families out there?”

Rory shook his head, grinning. “Nope. None. And, no, before you ask, it’s not exactly the same in animal form as in human form. But I’m still me in all of them. I’m perfectly capable of controlling my urges in all my forms.”

“But wouldn’t you feel like something was… lacking?” Max wanted to know, expression guarded.

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Chapter Seven

Max

Max had been entirely taken aback by the declaration that he and Rory were supposedly mates, and he had no idea what to make of Rory's casual acceptance of all of it. He couldn't believe that Rory would be satisfied with him; his sporadic forays into dating had taught him that much.

But Rory didn't seem to think this was an impediment.

"I can't imagine finding anything about you lacking," Rory said, and he sounded so damn earnest. "I've been looking for my mate for a long time, and nothing I've seen of you has been unappealing so far. Sure, you're a bit grumpy sometimes, but you were very kind to me when you thought I was just a bird."

Max cleared his throat and looked away for a moment. His voice was a little rough when he said, "I thought you might be my familiar."

"And is that why you scooped me up and brought me inside?" Rory asked.

"No, of course not," Max protested.

"Exactly," Rory said with certainty. "You're kind, like I said. And I might be your familiar."

Max was stunned. Of course there were shifter familiars, but the idea that he might have one had never so much as crossed his mind. He didn't like people. Why would he ever want to be tied to a person?

“I, uh, never considered that,” Max managed to say.

He’d known that it was a long shot that he’d get a familiar at all. Not all witches did. It was one of those mysteries of the universe: was there a familiar out there for every witch but they often never found one another? Was it genuinely only a small percentage of an already small population? Had it gotten worse recently because in the last few decades, witches had stopped being happy with animal familiars and wanted to find shifter familiars instead?

Rory sounded faintly amused. “I take it you aren’t part of the group of witches who want a shifter familiar to boost their power?”

Max made a face. “Ugh, no, thank you. I thought if I was very lucky, I might find an animal who was willing to put up with me like Nōwē does.”

“I can turn back into a bird?” Rory offered immediately.

This made Max frown. “No, I don’t want to force you to do anything.”

It was Rory’s turn to get a furrow to his brow. “I don’t see it like that. I’m Rory the human *and* Rory the bird. It’s just bringing one part of me to the foreground.”

Max immediately shook his head. “The only thing that should impact what form you take is your own desires.” He cleared his throat. “And I, uh, don’t mind you being human. You’re not as annoying as most of them are.”

This made Rory grin.

Max sighed. “I genuinely never really thought about it. My mom had a familiar.”

“Thistle,” Rory said softly. “You said.”

Right. Because Max had talked a lot to Red before he’d learned that Red could talk back.

He cleared his throat. “So that was my example of familiars. The idea of being tied to a person for the rest of my life?”

He tried to hold back a grimace, but he wasn’t sure he was successful. He couldn’t quite explain the mounting feeling of dread, the certainty that no matter what Rory thought now, he wouldn’t find Max enough eventually, or Max would be too rude, or Rory would be too cheerful…

There seemed to be so many ways it could go wrong. And if they had a witch-shifter bond, breaking that bond could kill one or both of them.

Rory reached out and squeezed his arm gently. His eyes were full of understanding. “Hey. It’s alright. We don’t have to decide anything right now. We haven’t known one another for very long, and I’m coming at it

from a completely different perspective than you are. We'll never do anything if we aren't *both* ready for it. And if we're never ready for it, then so be it."

"But isn't that the opposite of fated mates?" Max demanded.

Rory shrugged. "Like I said, it's a nudge towards someone compatible. We decide what to do with that. Maybe it means we part ways. Maybe it means we stay friends but it's never anything more. Maybe we bond but it's platonic. There are lots of ways people can be mates that don't mean hot and heavy sex all the time, even if that's the part all the shifter romances show."

Max couldn't help but laugh. "You mean I shouldn't be taking shifter romances as real life?"

Rory smiled at the joke, but Max realized that he sort of *had*. He'd been conditioned by a life of being surrounded by allosexuals to think that was always the end goal.

Maybe part of the reason he'd been concentrating on an animal familiar was because it was safe, because he knew he wouldn't disappoint an animal familiar.

Now here Rory was, saying he wouldn't be a disappointment to him… and Max just needed to figure out if he could believe him.

But Rory *was* right about timing. He'd known Rory was a person and not a bird for all of eight hours. Of course he was panicking over the idea that they might belong together.

He had no idea if Rory had some deeper connection to magic that had actually nudged him to this realization, but he believed that *Rory* believed it. Just like he'd said, he'd come at this from a completely different direction than Max, and he'd had days of being here to further cement his feelings on the matter.

"I'm going to need to think about all this," Max confessed.

Rory just smiled again. He smiled a lot. It wasn't as annoying as Max thought it would be. (And then he found himself wondering: was that because Rory was meant to be his mate? Did he like Rory *because* Rory was his mate? Or might Rory be his mate because Max liked him? Ugh. This shit was complicated.)

"Of course," Rory agreed easily. "There's no timeline." His brow furrowed. "But I can leave whenever you want, of course. I don't have to stay with you."

Max regarded him narrowly. “Where would you go?”

Rory shrugged. “I’d find somewhere else to stay.”

“But you don’t have somewhere specific to go or someone to stay with,” Max pressed.

“Nope,” Rory said, still brimming with cheerfulness. “But I’d figure it out. I always do.”

Max was almost positive that Rory would end up a cardinal again, living outside. Rory had told him that he didn’t usually let his bird instincts take over, that hitting the glass had apparently been because he’d caught sight of Max and *just known* that Max was his mate, but… what if he was shocked again? What if Rory got distracted and hit another window and this time, he wasn’t just stunned?

What if kids with pellet guns or paint ball guns or a slingshot shot him? What if there was an accident and he got hit by a car?

Max could actually feel his anxiety ratcheting up, swelling through his body. No, no, that was definitely not happening.

“You can stay here,” Max said firmly. “It’s fine.”

Rory looked hopeful, his golden eyes big and bright. “Really? Are you sure?”

Max nodded. “It’s fine.” He smirked. “We’ve already been roommates for days, haven’t we?”

A huge smile blossomed on Rory’s face. “Yeah, we have.”

Even though a large part of Max’s brain was telling him he was going to regret this, it didn’t *feel* like he was going to regret it—even if a human had a lot more needs than a bird, and seeds and a saucer of water weren’t going to cut it. But… they’d managed with the grocery shopping. It had been less of an ordeal than it usually was, in fact. Rory’s enthusiasm had been infectious. And much as Max usually hated incompetence, he found himself eager to… what, protect Rory? Something like that. He didn’t want the other man to be hurt, and he admired the fact that Rory seemed ready to learn and embrace every new experience.

Now that Max was aware that he’d been a bird for the last decade or so—holy shit, he still couldn’t quite grasp that—it definitely explained a few things. Rory recognized a lot, but there were things he had no hands-on experience with. (Because he hadn’t had hands for the last decade. The mind boggled.)

Max was a witch, not a shifter, but he liked to think of himself as broadly well educated. He knew that while there were no hard and fast rules about shifting, it wasn't very common for someone to spend that much consecutive time in their animal form, not unless something had gone wrong.

Of course, based on the little Rory had said, something *had* gone wrong, and Max wasn't going to press for more information, certainly not this soon. If Rory had needed nearly a decade as a bird to process it, it wasn't something to bring up lightly. Especially since he'd apparently changed back because he'd worried he was inadvertently deceiving Max, not because he'd gotten over what had happened. Or… Max considered this. Might he actually have gotten over what had happened, but he'd been kind of… stuck in his bird form? Maybe not literally, but mentally and emotionally? And he'd needed something to give him a nudge to change back?

Max was pretty sure that made a lot more sense than Magic pairing people up and Max being a partner for anyone.

Yeah, that was way more reasonable.

And if that was the case, then it was totally reasonable for Max to help Rory reintegrate as a human. As far as Max was aware, shifters didn't usually lose themselves in their animal forms, but who knew if the regular rules applied when someone was shifted for that long. If nothing else, there would have been plenty of things Rory hadn't done for a decade simply because he hadn't been capable. That had to leave a mark.

Max would make sure that Rory had time to acclimate to being human again. Even if Max didn't really believe that they were mates, he didn't want anything bad to happen to Rory. He'd clearly been through something traumatic and stressful. He didn't seem to have anyone to depend upon, and Max was willing to be that person until Rory was back on his human feet and ready to face the world. (Well, honestly, he seemed like he was ready to face it now, but Max wanted him to be better *prepared*.)

Max realized that Rory had finished all the food on his plate. Max had apparently been eating absentmindedly while pondering Rory, and had nearly finished his own meal as well. He didn't really remember eating it—apart from the burning heat.

"Want more?" Max asked.

They’d made a serious dent in the meal, but there were leftovers. It might not make another full meal, but Max could always have a sandwich instead, since it was obvious Rory had loved the spicy heat.

“No, I’m good,” Rory assured him. “It was delicious. Thank you.”

Max would definitely add curry to the rotation. He’d been too cheap to order a lot of takeout over the years, but now there were two of them.

“Want ice cream?” Max asked.

Rory’s face lit up.

Max got the ice cream out of the freezer and then left it on the counter to soften up a little while he cleared the table and packed up the leftovers. Even though he told Rory he didn’t have to help, the shifter did anyway, demeanor open and cheerful.

If there was someone who was Max’s opposite, it was probably Rory. (But wasn’t “opposites attract” a cliché for a reason? No, Max wasn’t thinking about that. Just because Rory had fanciful romantic notions in his head didn’t mean that Max did. Despite what Rory had said, Max had learned that romance rarely came without a desire for sex, and he didn’t want to deal with that again.)

Max found an old container of chocolate sauce in the cupboard, and they began to dish up the ice cream.

“I’m not sure when it’s from,” he admitted. “But it’s mostly sugar, so it’s probably okay.”

Rory snatched it up and liberally squirted chocolate sauce all over his ice cream—which was rocky road, so it wasn’t like there wasn’t an abundance of sweetness and chocolate already.

“Can I put whatever I want on it?” Rory asked.

“Of course,” Max answered, even as he worried that he was about to witness a hot sauce debacle.

But no, Rory had apparently just decided that there weren’t enough nuts in there already, and he added more from the mixed nuts he’d gotten at the grocery store before holding them out to Max.

“No, I’m good,” Max assured him.

He’d never been a huge fan of the salty and sweet combo, and those were salted nuts. Rory shrugged, popped another nut in his mouth, and then snapped the lid back in place.

They settled back at the dining table, Max with his little bowl of undoctored ice cream, and Rory with his bowl mounded high with ice

cream, nuts, and chocolate sauce. He made ridiculous happy sounds as he ate his ice cream—but he was fully concentrated on his dessert, so Max didn't think he was trying to be alluring. (One of his short-lived boyfriends in university had made overblown moaning sounds while eating food, and this was apparently supposed to be appealing. He'd been really annoyed when Max hadn't been the slightest bit aroused.)

When Rory scraped up the last of the ice cream and swallowed it down, he had a rapturous expression on his face.

"Ice cream is delicious," he declared. "I mean, I guess I knew that before, but it's been a while, and it's extra noticeable now."

Max was going to have to get some whipped cream in a can, wasn't he?

Rory insisted on cleaning up, claiming that Max had done dinner. Since they were talking about a couple bowls and utensils, Max decided it wasn't worth fighting over. The apartment had a dishwasher, but he rarely bothered to use it. With just him—and his propensity to eat sandwiches—it had never been worth it. Evie usually put it on when she came to visit, claiming they needed to make sure it still worked.

"What do you want to do now?" Max asked.

Rory looked confused. "Aren't we going to go downstairs so you can work on the spellbooks? That's what we usually do."

That's what they'd done when Max hadn't realized he'd had a guest; he'd simply had a bird on his shoulder who followed him everywhere and didn't get to voice an opinion on their activities.

"You wouldn't mind?" Max asked.

Now Rory looked as confused as Max felt. "Why would I mind? It's what we normally do."

That wasn't exactly the point, but maybe it wasn't *not* the point, either. Max had asked the question, giving Rory an opportunity to indicate literally anything else that he'd like to do, and he'd brought up the one thing that Max preferred.

"Right," Max said, still feeling nonplussed. "Let's go, then."

It was different heading into the room with a person rather than a bird, at least in theory. Max missed the tiny weight on his shoulder, if he were being totally honest. But he liked talking to Rory more than he thought he would. He usually found people irritating. Even the rare people he loved, like his sister, could be too much. (Though he'd never say so out loud, it wasn't

necessarily a bad thing that there was an entire country between them most of the time.)

But Rory, despite his boundless enthusiasm—or perhaps because of it, somehow?—wasn't annoying. And just like he had during the day at the store, he did his own thing. At first, it was distracting, and Max found his eyes constantly straying from his books to see what the shifter was doing. But it soon became apparent that Rory was careful, which was what really mattered. (The dangerous spells were locked away, and Rory was a shifter, so he couldn't cast spells anyway.)

He was attentive as he removed and shelved books, he was gentle with the books themselves, and he wasn't at all hesitant about sprawling on the floor with Nōwē and petting her, which his prickly feline seemed to think was a vast improvement to how they normally spent their evenings. The purrs were very soothing, and Max was soon able to concentrate on his work, getting through the requests he hadn't managed during the day. (Someone had requested a spell that made a cloud of soap bubbles around someone for a few hours. Max was sure he'd seen something that would probably work, but it had taken him longer than he expected to track the spell down.) Once he was finished, he continued his own work of detailing all the spells in his possession.

He was startled by his ten thirty alarm, which was meant to remind him that it was time to wind down and go to bed soon. He hadn't realized it had gotten that late. He looked over sharply at Rory, but he was still on the floor cuddled up with Nōwē, and he was reading a book—not a spellbook but a novel, so at some point, he'd apparently gone out and come back, and Max hadn't even noticed.

Rory smiled at him. "Time to head upstairs?"

Max raised his hands above his head and stretched. Witches lived longer than humans did, but he *was* still getting older. He leaned back and forth a few times, stretching out the kinks.

"Yes," he agreed. "How's your book?"

Rory held it up so that Max could see that it was almost definitely a romance, given the half-naked man on the cover. Why was he half-naked when he was standing outside in the snow?

"Great!" Rory told him enthusiastically. "Well, it's very silly, but I like that."

Max couldn't help but smile. "Fair enough."

“The main characters are trapped together in a snowed-in cabin.”

Max groaned. “That would be the worst.”

Rory laughed. “They don’t seem to mind.”

Yeah, somehow, in romance books, it always turned into the best thing that could ever have happened to the main characters, despite the fact that in reality, it would surely be awkward and uncomfortable. And what was the statistical probability that you would happen to be trapped somewhere with your ideal partner?

Max snuck a glance at Rory. What were the chances that of all the places Rory could fly, he happened to fly down the street of Max’s bookshop, happened to look in, and happened to see Max?

Not that Max believed that was fate.

Surely, it was pure chance.

Max set the ward spells, and they headed upstairs, where Max caught a glimpse of his bedroom, and it belatedly occurred to Max that *he only had one bed*.

Oh, gods, had he somehow stumbled into the plot of a romance novel? How did he get out of it?

Apparently, he looked as horrified as he felt, and Rory saw where his gaze went. He squeezed Max’s arm. “Hey. It’s nothing to worry about. You have a perfectly usable couch.”

Max had a couch that was fine for sitting on, but he’d fallen asleep on it occasionally, and honestly, it wasn’t great for that. And while Max’s hospitality was rusty at best, he was aware that he really shouldn’t be making his guest sleep on the couch. But he had zero interest in losing his bed.

Rory huffed a soft laugh, still not looking at all perturbed. At least one of them wasn’t stressed.

“We’ve got lots of options here,” he pointed out. “First of all, I don’t have to stay.”

“Of course you’re staying,” Max said flatly.

Rory couldn’t hide how pleased he was at this declaration, and Max chose not to question his own vehemence. But seriously, he couldn’t envision throwing Red out onto the street and just trusting that such a tiny bird was going to survive. The world could be a terrible place. There was no way he could let that happen.

“I really could sleep on the couch,” Rory assured him.

“It’s not the best for sleeping on,” Max admitted.

“I don’t mind.”

“Next suggestion?”

Rory eyed him carefully. “Anabelle from this morning reminded me—”

“Who’s Anabelle?” Max interrupted.

“The nice lady who wanted to talk to you about romance tropes. She bought half a dozen books, and we had an excellent discussion about our favorites. It’s how I ended up picking out my novel for tonight. I had forced proximity on my mind.”

“Okay,” Max said, confused.

He’d already known it, but here was another reminder that Rory was definitely an extrovert who liked people. He knew the *names of customers*. Deliberately. Probably because he’d introduced himself. Ugh.

“Yeah,” Rory said cheerfully. “She reminded me that there’s all sorts of occasions where sharing a bed *isn’t* the start of a romance novel. Siblings share. Friends share. Uninterested people share when the occasion calls for it. Despite what romance novels would have you believe, it is absolutely not the start of foreplay and sex 100% of the time.”

Max blew out a breath. “I know that.”

The issue was how to be *sure* that both people felt the same way. As someone who had zero attraction awareness, he’d been caught out more than once at university in what rapidly became very awkward situations.

Avoiding people was so much easier.

But he couldn’t avoid Rory, because if he did, Rory would wind up on the street. And even if it was on the street as a cardinal, that wasn’t okay.

Rory was still smiling, not seeming put out at all. “We’re not doing anything you’re not comfortable with. There’s an even simpler solution.”

Max could buy an inflatable bed? But, like, not right now…

And then, with a weird shimmer and strange sense of *collapsing*, Rory was a little red cardinal.

Oh. *Oh*. They *had* slept in the apartment together just fine for… what, almost two weeks? Rory wasn’t putting any pressure on him at all, wasn’t claiming that it was going to be fine to share a bed and then suddenly plastering all over Max and suggesting that they might as well get one another off now that they were in this situation.

“You don’t mind?” Max asked, before he could help himself.

Weird unfolding/expanding this time (magic was cool but weird), and human Rory was standing there once more.

"Of course I don't mind," Rory said, sounding supremely sure. "I'm me as a bird and a human, remember."

"Right." Rory *had* said that, more than once, but Max still felt wrong-footed. "But it's comfortable to sleep like a bird? Truly?"

Looking a little amused now, Rory assured him, "Of course. Birds do it all the time."

Well, yeah, obviously.

Max shot him a look. "But it's comfortable *for you*? You don't ever feel, I don't know, compressed?"

Yes, Max understood that magic was magic and conservation of mass didn't apply, but *still*. Whole-ass person. Tiny cardinal.

Rory laughed, his humor infectious rather than mocking. "No, I don't ever feel compressed. When I'm in my bird form, that's me, and I'm not meant to be anything else. The same in my human form. I don't feel stretched and humongous."

Max had never thought about it the other way around. He'd always considered shifters humans who could shift into animals. Rory made it sound more like he was simply… both forms. Except he clearly kept his human intelligence, or Max was sure there would be way more bird poop around his apartment and store by now.

"Well, if you're sure you're okay with it," Max finally agreed. "I'd appreciate it."

Rory's expression was soft. "Max, you're the one putting up a stranger to whom you owe nothing. Of course I don't mind accommodating you while you go out of your way to help me. I mean, I'd want you to be comfortable regardless, but I want it *extra*."

Max had always found that when you offered someone an inch, they were more likely to take a mile… but maybe Rory was an exception to the rule.

"I'm going to put my pajamas on," Max said a bit abruptly.

"I'll brush my teeth," Rory told him, smiling. "Not that a bird really needs their teeth brushed, but I'll want them to be clean when I'm back in human form."

Max almost allowed himself to be distracted. Did you wind up with morning breath if you slept as a bird and then became a human again? Was

plaque forming on your teeth? Or were they in the exact same state as they had been when you changed forms?

He'd never thought about that before.

But instead of falling down the rabbit hole at this precise moment, Max headed into the bedroom, closing the door and pondering the fact that every night before this, his cardinal had always hopped around in his bed, not looking at Max as he got changed. Even when Max hadn't known Red was a human, he'd been respecting Max's boundaries.

Max tugged off his shirt and threw it in the hamper. Yes, days had passed where he'd thought he was talking to a bird and not a human who could actually understand him, but the more he got to know Rory, the more clear it became to him that Rory had genuinely not thought about it like that. He'd been himself, and he hadn't quite processed how that self came across to Max.

Ten years. Max shucked his jeans and pulled on PJ bottoms and another t-shirt, this one ancient, the image and lettering cracked, half-gone, and worn soft enough that it didn't irritate him for sleeping.

When he opened the door, Rory was seated on the couch with his book. Max passed into the bathroom, where he relieved himself and brushed his teeth.

When he emerged, Rory glanced up at him.

"Want to read for a little while in bed?" Max blurted out before he could second guess himself.

Rory's eyes widened slightly, and then a huge grin overtook his face. He clambered to his feet. "Yes, please! Then I'll change into Red, and you can stretch out like a starfish!"

Max rolled his eyes. "Hey, I was just enjoying actually being able to sleep in most of the bed instead of Nōwē taking over nine tenths of it."

Laughing, Rory agreed, "It *is* impressive just how much space cats can take up. And, I mean, just as an observation, you don't have to worry that Nōwē's going to eat me. She knows I'm a shifter."

Shifters typically weren't bothered by other animals when they were shifted, not even by their usual predators. The theory was that they sensed the magic in some way and knew the animal wasn't what it appeared. But there were always exceptions that led to attacks or deaths in extreme circumstances.

Rory seemed extremely confident, though, and it was true that Nōwē hadn't made a single move against Red the whole time he'd been here. It still made unease prickle under his skin, but he'd take Rory's word for it.

Within a few short minutes, they were both leaning back against the headboard, their legs tucked under the blankets. Nōwē hopped up and settled down between them. Max was rereading *The Hobbit*, and Rory was still making his way through his ridiculous romance. His occasional giggle made Max smile. It was less disruptive than he'd expected.

It was probably about thirty minutes later that Rory yawned, closed his book, and set it on the bedside table.

"I'll have to finish it tomorrow," he said. "Goodnight, Max."

"Goodnight, Rory."

And a moment later, Max was alone in bed, and a cardinal fluttered over to perch briefly on his shoulder and rub his feathers against Max's neck. Max petted him without conscious thought (thankfully before he could wonder if it was weird). Rory had already explained that it wasn't like there was a human squished into the bird, so it was probably fine to continue to treat him like a bird, at least in this respect.

Red—Rory—chirped at him and then fluttered to Max's bedside table, where the box Max had originally set up for him still perched. He hopped around, wiggled a bit, and then settled in just like he had before Max had known he was a shifter.

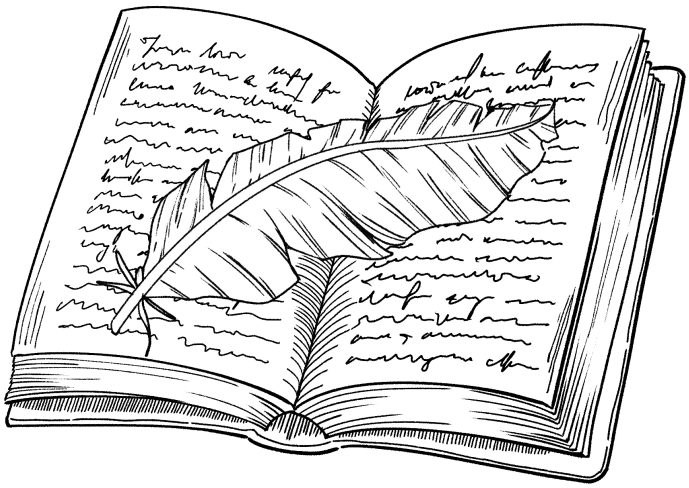
Max went back to his book but only read for a few more minutes before he found himself yawning, too. He set the book aside, looked at Red and Nōwē settled peacefully, and turned out the light.

He burrowed all the way beneath the covers, mind still reeling a little from everything that had happened today. Tomorrow would be Alex's first afternoon working. Tomorrow morning, he'd promised to take Rory clothes shopping.

A couple weeks ago, Max had been alone and liked it that way, only periodically annoyed by his sister texting from across the country. Was he ready for everything that was to come?

He had no idea.

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Chapter Eight

Rory

It was true that Max was grumpy and didn't seem to really like people in general, but Rory didn't think he recognized all the ways that he was actually very kind and awesome. He'd taken Rory in, after all, and he'd given Alex a job, and Rory didn't buy for a minute that it was primarily self-serving. Sure, there were ways that it helped him, and that was what he focused on, but he was also giving them the place they needed, and Rory thought that outweighed any other considerations.

At the thrift store, Max had told Rory to get whatever he wanted, not bothering to give any sort of limitation. *Rory* believed that they were mates, but he knew that Max wasn't convinced. Yet Max was making sure that Rory wasn't just housed and fed, but that he was also comfortable and had things of his own.

Max was not at all satisfied when Rory picked up a pair of pants and two t-shirts.

"You're not a bird right now!" Max groused. "You're not going to wear the same thing every day! Look again."

As a bird, the clothes disappeared—magic!—and reappeared once he was human again. There was no way that counted as continuous wear. But now that Rory had found his mate, he'd prefer to be in human form more frequently.

The last thing he wanted was for Max to feel like he was failing Rory in some way, especially when he was being so very generous. Rory didn't want to waste Max's hard-earned money, but it was true that normal people expected to see other people in more than one outfit of clothing, and it was possible someone would visit the store on consecutive days.

Rory liked clothing that was in bright colors, especially reds, oranges, and yellows, although he could see the appeal of the universal blue jeans. These flashy colors were not at all what Max liked to wear; his graphic tees were often black or navy, though occasionally another color snuck in. Max seemed to like sarcasm most of all.

Rory allowed himself to be talked into three pairs of pants, four t-shirts—because he was going to wear the Read for a Spell shirt at the shop, wasn't he?—a sweater, a sweatshirt, a coat, a pair of pajamas, two pajama bottoms, a pair of shoes, *and* a pair of boots. Max said underwear and socks needed to be purchased new, and Rory didn't argue with him, since he didn't have a strong opinion on the matter. Clothing was a weird invention to begin with, but Rory had certainly grasped over the years that almost all cultures required it. And there were times where being naked could be uncomfortable. (Humans were weirdly designed with bits that flopped around.) Rory didn't ever have to worry about being cold, since he had his fire to keep him warm, but that was also a concern for most humans.

At the counter with the cash register, there was a bin filled with hand-knitted hats, scarves, and mittens. A sign proclaimed that the residents of a nearby retirement home donated them, and all proceeds went to charity.

Max dug through the bin until he came out with a matching set of hat, scarf, and mittens in red and gold. Rory's coat was sadly a sort of beige-cream color, as there hadn't been a lot of choice, but Max had said it would keep him warm as the weather got colder. The embellishment of color would definitely help, and Rory appreciated that Max had hunted out what Rory would like rather than something neutral and less noticeable. He *definitely* liked the fact that Max was acting like Rory was going to be here as it got colder. (Admittedly, huge swathes of the northern hemisphere got colder at this time of year. But still!)

Rory wore the new shoes out of the shop, but everything else was bundled into Max's reusable bags because washing everything was a must, apparently. (As an old and magical shifter, Rory didn't have to worry about

catching anything or getting sick, but he could see that making sure everything was clean was a good practice.)

A quick stop at a bigger grocery store allowed Rory to get underwear and socks—at a *grocery* store, but they had a lot of non-food items, it turned out—and then they headed back to the bookshop. Max put the laundry on before they trooped downstairs to open the store. Nōwē immediately took up her perch at the display window.

By the time Alex showed up at three thirty, Max had been able to spend most of the afternoon in the back room with his spellbooks because Rory had handled the people. Rory might have spent a lot more time with each customer than was strictly necessary for a sale, but as Max had observed, Mondays weren't that busy.

Rory hadn't *exactly* forgotten that he'd only been a bird around Alex, but it maybe wasn't top of mind, and so he greeted them warmly.

They looked a bit confused. "Where's Max?"

Thankfully, Rory remembered to say, "Research in the back." He'd gotten a bit out of practice, but it was generally second nature for shifters and witches to censor themselves around normal people. "I'm staying with Max for a bit, and I like people a lot more than he does, so I've been working out here so that he can do what he prefers."

Alex snorted. "Yeah, I noticed that. Anyone ever tell him that a job that relies on people relies on people?"

Rory smiled. "I think he's still working on a solution for that one. You want to stick up here at the cash register first, and we'll make sure you're familiar with how it works?"

"Sounds good," Alex agreed.

Rory gave Alex a quick scan, confirming with human eyes what he'd already seen with bird eyes: Alex was healthy and had a long lifeline, just what Rory would hope to see from someone so young.

When Alex caught him looking, Rory hastened to say, "I love your shirt. It looks amazing."

This was the simple truth. Alex had taken the Read for a Spell t-shirt and completely transformed it. They'd replaced the short sleeves with long ones in a pattern of geometric colors that repeated at the new neckline and hem. Art that was reminiscent of the window display had been drawn on the shirt itself, all in fun colors.

It was so much more interesting than it had been before, when it had just said “Read for a Spell” with the logo of an open book and magical swirls.

Rory’s shirt felt very lackluster by comparison.

“Did you want me to make you one?” Alex asked.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” Rory immediately demurred, trying not to look as hopeful as he felt.

“I don’t mind,” they insisted. “I like crafting.”

“Well, if you really don’t mind.” Rory gave in quickly, his eyes going back to the bright colors. It really was so much nicer than the boring shirt. “I don’t have any money right now, and Max and I are still arguing about how much he should pay me because he’s already providing me with room and board. But if I have money eventually, I’d be happy to give it to you.”

Alex waved this aside. “Nah. Like I said, this is fun. Gives me the chance to practice and hone my skills. That’s always a good thing.”

In that case, once Rory had money, he would figure out a present to give Alex.

The bell jingled, and they tag-teamed serving the customer. Alex didn’t seem like quite as much of a people person as Rory was, but they were more polite than Max. They picked up the payment machine quickly, and before they knew it, it was five.

With his enhanced hearing, Rory heard the alarm go off in the back room. Max had cast some sort of spell that muffled sound, so it was harder to hear, but that was no match for Rory’s hearing.

“What?” Max muttered. “How is it five already?”

A moment later, Max appeared, gaze snagging on Rory and Alex behind the counter.

“Alex! You’re here!” He blinked at them. “I was, uh, going to actually be present for your first day. I got lost in a few books. Sorry about that.”

Alex pointed a thumb at Rory. “No worries. Rory showed me what to do.”

“We make a good team,” Rory agreed. “Gives you more time for your research, and I get to talk to as many people as I want.”

“And I get to remind people of the value of the arts and nurture a love of learning,” Alex added. “It’s going great.”

Max looked taken aback. “Oh, well, great. Seriously, though, I didn’t mean to totally abandon you on your first day. You can, uh, always yell for me if you need anything. Sometimes the books I’m working on are delicate

and, uh, light-sensitive, so you'd better not come into the back room, but if you yell my name, I'll come out."

Rory was pretty sure that wasn't the best cover ever, but it appeared Max hadn't given a lot of thought to what they were going to do with a non-magical person in a half-magical shop.

Alex stared at him for a moment and then said, "No problem," in a very smooth way that told Rory they weren't buying it but were going to play along.

And really, what *was* Max going to tell Alex? They weren't likely to believe that it was expensive texts back there, given that Max didn't have a door on the room. And Max wouldn't want Alex to think he didn't trust them.

Rory had never been a big fan of hiding, but the necessity had been brought home to him on more than one occasion. Individual humans could be perfectly lovely, but they could also be awful, especially collectively, and it wasn't always easy to tell which was which.

Not that Rory seriously believed that Alex wasn't one of the good ones, but even if they contravened the Council's directive and told Alex, what then? Alex would be keeping a huge secret from their mom—and the rest of the world. And while they seemed like an awesome kid, that was a lot of pressure to put on them.

Yeah, he supposed Max's ridiculous story was the best they could do for now.

They were able to close up pretty quickly, Max showing both of them how to tally and reconcile the receipts for the day.

"I want to go cash free," Max told them. "Wouldn't need a till or petty cash that way. It would make a lot of sense." He sighed. "But we still get kids in here with their birthday money and little old couples who don't trust plastic cards. So we're still taking cash for the moment."

Because Max might be grumpy, but he took his customers' needs into account, and he seemed to like to look after the ones who sometimes got overlooked. But be wary if you were rude and entitled. Those people got short shrift from Max. (He'd answered three phone calls before he'd gone into the back room earlier today, and two of them had ended with Max hanging up abruptly on whoever was on the line.)

Once they had everything tallied up, the cash went into Max's safe in the back—it was in the spellbook room, so Rory assumed it was protected

magically as well as in mundane ways. Max took his deposits to the banks only every week or two, because the vast majority of his transactions were via card, and he couldn't be bothered to go to the bank daily for such paltry amounts.

"I promise I'll be more present tomorrow," Max told Alex. "I'm sure you did an awesome job, because I didn't hear any yelling, and no one asked to speak to a manager."

Alex scoffed, but they looked amused. "Yeah, we did alright."

"I'll come out tomorrow for sure. We can go over a bit more. Any questions or concerns?"

Alex considered this and then shook their head. "Nope, not so far."

"It was great to work with you," Rory told them. "You seem to like people more than Max does." He winked. "At least a little."

Max made a disgruntled noise. "People are the worst."

Alex laughed, and Rory grinned.

Alex grabbed up their bag, where they'd tucked it behind the counter. "Okay, I'll see you tomorrow. Thanks, Rory. Thanks, Max."

"Bye," Max and Rory chorused.

As Alex got to the door, they paused to say goodbye to Nōwē, who deigned to allow them to pet her.

"The shirt looks really good, by the way," Max called out.

Alex flashed him a smile. "Thanks."

And then they were gone. Max went to lock the door again, then turned back to Rory.

"You could have come to get me."

"I know," Rory assured him. "You weren't very far away, and I was definitely going to call you if there was anything I couldn't handle. But honestly, it wasn't that busy, and we didn't really need you."

Max looked like he felt he should be protesting, so Rory tried again. "I know you didn't exactly plan to hire two people just now. I know I'm not totally necessary, so I was hoping to help. But I could look at other job possibilities if you want."

As expected, this resulted in Max immediately demurring. "No, don't be ridiculous. This way, you and Alex get to deal with people, and I get to deal with books. It's perfect."



On Tuesday, Max gave Rory the spare key to the apartment, saying he should be able to come and go when he wanted if he was living there.

On Wednesday, he gave Rory a phone, telling him it was his old one, and Rory definitely needed it to “stay connected” these days. The only person Rory really wanted to stay connected with was someone he was living with, so he didn’t see why the phone was necessary… but having Alex’s number wasn’t a terrible idea.

And then Rory discovered cat videos, and he suddenly understood why mortals spent so much time on these little devices. He’d always known that cats were wonderful, evil, and hilarious, and now he had lots of evidence to back that belief up.

On Friday, Max brought Rory to D&D. *Dungeons & Dragons* was a game where humans pretended to be various mostly magical beings. It was sometimes played on a board with little figures, sometimes the players voiced the interaction they were having, and sometimes they just talked about what was happening.

Rory was fascinated. There were lots of rules, and several of the players had various books stacked beside them to double check things. Apparently, it was also all online now. (The people who liked the paper books were “old school.”) Rory supposed that if you weren’t actually magical, there had to be some sort of mechanism to understand how magic worked for everyone and how encounters would go.

Max handed Rory what he said were character sheets so that he could participate.

“You’re a druid,” Max told him. “Which means that amongst other abilities, you can shapeshift into various animals.”

He winked, and Rory beamed at him. Now if he said something weird, the normal people would think he was just getting into the game. Max was very clever. Whoever had invented this game was very clever. Rory wondered if they were a witch or a shifter, or if they somehow knew about the magical world. Or if they were truly just a very imaginative human.

“I have no idea what’s going on,” Rory told everyone cheerfully. “This is very exciting.”

They laughed and welcomed him. Max pulled up a chair next to him for Rory, who sat down gratefully. There were a number of speculative looks as the group stared at him and Max, but thankfully, Max seemed totally oblivious, and the looks soon faded.

They introduced themselves, and Rory peered at their lifelines and was pleased to see that they all looked healthy and should live long lives. (This could change, since nothing was written in stone, but there was nothing Rory needed to worry about right now.) They proceeded to try to fill him in on the campaign thus far, which left him hopelessly confused and laughing a lot.

It seemed that you needed *a lot* of dice to play this game. Not only did you have different ones with different numbers of sides, you needed lots of the same dice, even when you didn’t roll more than one or two of them at a time.

“Look at how pretty they are,” Tom enthused.

He was the shyest of the group, with pale skin and floppy brown hair that he often pushed out of his eyes. Right now, those green eyes were sparkling almost as much as the handful of dice he was showing off.

“How can you not want more?” he demanded.

David leaned towards Rory, which put him very close to Tom, who was sitting between them. He appeared to have some Asian ancestry, with dark eyes and short dark hair that was shiny and straight.

Smiling at both Rory and Tom, he explained, “And if one of them isn’t behaving, then it goes into dice jail, and you need another.”

Rory blinked at the dice. “In what manner do they misbehave? What sort of jail?”

Rory hadn’t realized that inanimate objects *could* misbehave.

David reached around Tom to pat Rory on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. You’ll catch on.”

By the end of the evening, Rory was still hopelessly lost on the mechanics, but he was charmed by the group. They were great people, and led by Max, they were always willing to tell him what to do, which dice to use, and gently correct him when he tried to do something that wasn't allowed. (David, apparently, was a bit of what the others called a "rules lawyer," but he wasn't mean about it.)

Rory still only half knew what was going on, but it was totally worth it to watch the ridiculous actions of the group, who seemed always to be falling into scrapes thanks to their rogue—or maybe because their fairy barbarian lost her temper or their surly wizard pissed someone off. (Rory laughed and laughed when he realized Max was playing himself.)

Once Rory had realized it was a storytelling game, he'd simply thought about what his character would do and then tried to do it. There were weird rules about what kind of animal he could shift into with what frequency, but he did enjoy the fact that he could be all kinds of animals, not just birds. Sometimes it was even useful, but the group didn't seem to mind if he decided he simply wanted to experiment.

(This did lead to a whole rant that went right over Rory's head about 5e rules versus the 5.5e refresh and what shapes and how many were allowed. Rory just waited until someone told him yes or no.)

He admired the way their DM Stella managed to wrangle them and still get something accomplished even when they chose to do the most ridiculous things possible. Her hair was cut short in a pixie cut and dyed multiple bright rainbow colors, which Rory thought was the best thing ever. She sometimes rolled her eyes a lot, but she never lost her cool. She had pale skin, brown eyes, and lots of curves which Sam seemed to admire a lot.

Edward cast appreciative glances her way occasionally, too, but in a way that indicated he knew she was totally unavailable and he simply thought she was pretty. Which was good for him, because while Sam was only a fairy barbarian in the game, Rory was quite sure she wouldn't take well to someone trying to steal her partner. Sam was the shortest person in the room, probably 5'4" or so, with long dark hair braided into dozens of tiny braids, dark eyes, and chestnut skin, but with an attitude that lit up a whole room. Rory had no doubt that in a fight, Edward would lose.

Several times when things had gone very well or very poorly, Sam had come over to smack a big kiss on Stella's lips. Otherwise, Sam seemed to spend most of her time trying to smash her way through everything Stella

set up—but that didn't seem to upset her partner at all, so maybe that was their love language?

Rory had read a book about love languages once. He thought humans were probably more complicated than that, but it was an interesting idea that gave a way to think about how you felt loved and how you could show that love to others. He eyed Max. He was pretty sure he showed his caring through acts of service, but, like… sneaky acts that he didn't really want you to notice. Rory would have to think about that.

Rory, on the other hand, simply told people how he felt, as evidenced by the fact that he'd blurted everything out to Max practically the first moment he had human vocal cords. He had no idea if that had been the right thing to do or not, but it was over and done with now. He didn't like the idea of lying to the man, so it was probably for the best. It could still end with Max not wanting a romantic relationship with him, but hopefully, he'd at least want friendship. And if he didn't even want that…

Well, Rory couldn't truthfully say he wouldn't be worse off than before, because he'd know the amazing person that was out there for him didn't want him back. But he'd still have spent as much time with Max as he could.

He was so glad that Max had invited him to participate in this game.

Tom and David were conducting a very adorable campaign of subtle flirtation, and Rory wasn't quite sure whether it was between their dwarf cleric and dragonborn bard or between the two of them. He thought it was both.

They'd "leveled up" at the end of the session, which meant homework. The game allowed for characters to improve and face more difficult challenges by learning new spells and abilities at intervals set by the DM. It really was fascinating.

Rory looked at Max, who assured him, "I'll show you what to do."

He hadn't ever doubted it. Max seemed determined to keep Rory comfortable and happy. He could easily have left Rory in the apartment—or not kept Rory at all!—but instead he'd included him in this game and given Rory a chance to meet all these fun people.

As they were all packing everything away—there was a lot to bring when you had dice and minis and books and snacks and character sheets and notebooks and spell cards—Rory asked, "What kind of books do you all like to read?"

Stella liked LitRPG, Sam liked romantasy—“All sorts, but sapphic preferred!”—David liked mysteries, and Edward liked fantasy and thrillers. Tom got red in the face and then mumbled that he liked romances because he liked the happy endings.

“I know what you mean!” Rory exclaimed, grinning at him. “Sometimes, the world is terrible, and it’s nice to read something that’s reliable and is definitely going to end well, right?”

Tom offered him a small smile. “Yes, exactly.”

“Have you tried any cozy mysteries?” David asked. “They often have a romantic subplot, and while there’s some sort of crime, it’s rarely dark or terrible. It tends to be more lighthearted than a regular mystery.”

Tom shook his head. “What… what do you recommend?”

As they headed out, David pulled out his phone to show Tom his Kindle, talking a mile a minute as he gave Tom more suggestions than he could probably read in the next month.

“I’ve got a couple in paperback,” David went on. “How about I bring them next week, and you give that a try? So you’ll know if you like them before you invest.”

Smiling shyly, Tom said, “I’d like that.”

Stella patted Rory on the shoulder on the way out. “Nice job.”

Rory was pretty sure she wasn’t talking about the game.

They all echoed the sentiment that it was nice to meet him and they hoped he’d be coming back.

“I hope so, too,” Rory agreed. “This was a lot of fun. Although I’m still pretty sure I have no idea what’s going on.”

Max locked up behind them and then looked at Rory. “Was that okay?”

“They’re great,” Rory assured him, a huge smile on his face. “It was so much fun! I can’t believe how silly it is. I love it!”

Max looked like he was trying to suppress a smile. “I’m glad.”

“Can we do our homework now?” Rory asked. “I don’t want to forget. What happens if you don’t level up like you’re supposed to?”

“You probably die,” Max said casually.

Rory made a face.

Max laughed. “That’s why we have back-up characters ready to go. The DM tries to balance encounters so that they’re a challenge but not likely to kill everyone first thing, but things can go wrong. The dice tell the story.”

The dice were *still* inanimate objects with numbers painted on them, but Rory had observed that everyone at the table seemed to believe that these plastic cubes defied logic and probability to have control over the game.

It had become clear this wasn't something he should argue with them about.

"I like how everyone works together," Rory confessed. "Well, I mean, sometimes Edward does whatever he wants and we end up with a besotted dragon, but…"

Max was laughing again. "I know what you mean. There's a lot of collaboration rather than one winner."

Rory nodded. Yes, that was exactly it.

They headed upstairs, Nōwē meowing as she darted between them, firm in the belief that they'd gotten a lot more snacks than she had and that should be immediately rectified.

"It's time for bed," Rory told her, yawning. "Are you sure you're really hungry?"

It was the principle of the thing, apparently.

"How about we level up in the morning?" Max suggested.

It was after eleven. That was probably a good idea. Rory felt like he'd reached the limit of what he could possibly learn today. The knowledge wasn't hugely practical, but it was very entertaining.

"Sounds good," he agreed.

He wondered if you leveled up in real life, too. It certainly felt like he was embarking on a new adventure right now.



As they approached mid-October, they settled into a routine. While Max ran on the treadmill in the basement in the morning, Rory did a variety of HIIT,

dancing, or other workout routines. He found running boring, but he enjoyed workouts that frequently changed up what he was doing.

Rory liked that he and Max could be in the same room each doing what interested them. Max had checked on him a bit more at the beginning, like he was worried Rory was going to get bored or think that Max should do what he wanted instead, which was just silly.

This worked perfectly well, and there was no reason to change it.

Max listened to audiobooks while he ran, and Rory discovered new music every day with each new workout.

Alex redid the design in the window so that more leaves blew across the glass, and pumpkins had appeared as a border. Rory and Alex shared the duties in the bookshop whenever possible, allowing Max to work with the spellbooks.

Max had tried to convince Alex that all the people who called the shop and blurted out some version of “I need a spell” were part of a D&D-like game that involved a phone component. Alex appeared to believe him, but… more likely, Alex was just humoring them.

Rory or Max tried to answer the phone as often as possible, but sometimes, Alex was the one who got it, and sometimes, the person calling was a witch. Given how entrenched secrecy was in their society, the callers should really have been checking who was on the other end before they blurted out anything magical, but it seemed that people had grown used to it always being Max who answered the phone.

After a couple of phone calls, Alex created a *web form* that could be filled out online, either by the customer or by Alex, Rory, or Max. It took down all the pertinent information and had things like dropdowns and mandatory fields that compelled people to provide all the necessary information.

“You’re very smart,” Rory told Alex.

They flushed. “Thanks. It just seems silly when they don’t tell you what you need to know and then get upset when they don’t get the results they want.” They rolled their eyes. “They are *way* too invested in this game.”

Rory agreed. Even knowing it was real life, he still agreed. He couldn’t blame Max for being rude when some of the witches were so demanding. They were asking Max for help, but it was like he’d been created just to serve them, and if he didn’t get them exactly what they wanted instantly, he was doing something wrong.

A witch named Fernanda had wanted a spell to make flowers grow out of a person's ass. Why would anyone want that? Max had reminded her that spells that affected other people negatively were frowned upon, and then he'd hung up on her as she'd been trying to argue that it wasn't objectionable under the circumstances. She hadn't called back. Max had told both of them that they should delete any form submitted by her in future.

Rory had caught Alex "accidentally" deleting a form response when the witch had yelled at Rory while he was trying to take the information down. When an angry Paulo Valdemeer had called back and demanded to talk to the manager and then told Max what a terrible person Rory was, Max had told him never to call again because he wasn't going to get any service, and then he'd hung up on the man.

"I'm sorry," Alex said, shoulders slumped. "I didn't think they'd take it out on Rory. I should have thought of that."

Max just patted them on the shoulder. "We don't need customers like that. They can learn to mind their manners, or they can go elsewhere."

There were rude humans, too, sometimes.

Max sounded exasperated as he said over the phone, "As I've already said, once the books are given or sold to me, they're mine. Relatives can't simply claim them back." Max listened, huffed, and then said, "You do that, then… Uh huh… Okay. Bye."

He hung up, letting the phone fall back into the cradle with a crash.

"Everything alright?" Rory asked.

Max nodded, though he still looked disgruntled. "Yeah, just an entitled ass. They tried to claim that some books had been given to us by mistake when they were supposed to be his. Wouldn't surprise me at all if he'd been left out of the will because he was a jerk. Couldn't tell me specific titles or why they were of such deep sentimental value to him." Max rolled his eyes. "People are assholes."

Rory actually liked people a lot, but he had to agree that there were ones that weren't very nice.

And it wasn't just a case of them being nice if they were faced with niceness. Rory had been reminded over the last two weeks that being polite to people didn't necessarily mean they were going to be kind back.

But *overall,* people were nice, and they seemed to respond well to all of Rory's chattering. He loved to get to know them and what books they

wanted and why. He'd gotten better at spotting the ones who were not interested in chit-chat or who appreciated bookshops solely because they were full of books rather than people.

Max consulted with Alex, who designed an updated logo for name tags that could be clipped on with magnets and had their pronouns on them. That way, they could wear more than just the store shirts if they wanted to, and people would still know that they worked there, as well as knowing what pronoun to use, all without singling Alex out.

Alex had also followed through with making Rory an amazing shirt. They'd picked up on Rory's love of red, orange, and yellow. Rory wasn't sure if those colors simply made humans think of flames or if Rory was leaving clues he didn't realize, but the shirt was all fire-themed. The sleeves had been lengthened and turned into leaping flames, and Alex had drawn an open book with flames leaping out of it and curling around the shirt.

It was amazing, and Rory loved it—but Max had already made clear he couldn't wear the same shirt every day, because that wasn't what normal people did. Rory reluctantly put it into rotation, and it made him smile every time he got to wear it. (Alex looked pleased, too. They'd also presented Max with one, designed like it had been inked, all black outline work of books with sassy book quotations. Max wore his regularly, too.)

Every night after work, he and Max had dinner, then Max worked on his spellbooks if it wasn't too late. They invariably ended the evening reading in bed, even if it was only for a few minutes. Rory still turned into a cardinal every night, but he didn't mind. Bird bodies were very compact, and he never woke up feeling like he'd slept weird or poorly, which seemed to happen to humans quite a lot.

Rory loved all of it.

The phone rang on the shop counter, and Rory happily grabbed it up.

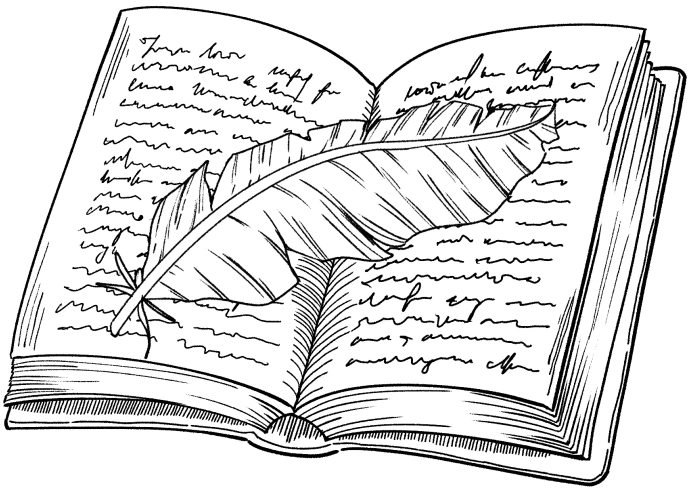
"Read for a Spell, Rory speaking."

"Hello, Rory. This is Gemma from Brewed Awakening, returning your call."

Rory brightened, because he'd had the *best* idea, and he just needed to get the coffee shop on board.

"Thanks so much for calling me back! How do you feel about books?"

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Chapter Nine

Max

Most annoying sibling in the entire world

So, how does it feel to have employees?

Max could practically *feel* the smugness radiating off of the words. She hadn't even done anything! Max hadn't intended to hire anyone, no matter what she'd said, it was just that Alex and Rory had needed him, and he wasn't about to ignore that.

Max

It's fine.

Most annoying sibling in the entire world

And now you can do a lot more of what you actually want to do, and you see why it was foolish to put it off for so many years just because you say you don't like people.

Max

I definitely don't like people. It's just that there are occasional exceptions.

You are not one of those exceptions.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

[tongue stuck out emoji]

MAX

Seriously, though, it's working out okay. They both seem to like people more than I do. Alex is awesome with art, and Rory is fabulous with people. He keeps… planning things. And, like, working with people.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

[eyebrow raised emoji] What kind of things?

Max thought about how to answer with his thumbs and then gave up and called Evie.

She answered the phone with a squeal of glee. "Oh, my god, you actually phoned me. Is it the second coming? Should I be ready for the apocalypse?"

"Ha ha," Max said, dry as dust. "You're so funny."

She was grinning, he just knew it. "I know. I'm hilarious and a gift to the world. What's Rory planning?"

"He talked to one of the local coffee shops, Brewed Awakening, and now we have a shelf full of books there, and they have coffee and cookies here."

"With the *books*?" Evie sounded scandalized, which he knew she was putting on because Max had always had very strong opinions about situations where it was likely that books were going to end up stained and damaged.

"In a little section of the shop," Max corrected. "He said the smell would attract people, and he seems to be right. We have a sign saying where the snacks are from, and it's driving business over there, too. People are staying longer to browse or sit in a chair and read, but they're buying, too."

"I'm glad," Evie said earnestly. Then she snorted. "How are you coping with the fact that it means more people in the shop?"

Max sighed, but rallied. "As long as I don't have to deal with them, it's not that bad. He also says he's got some leads on renting out the basement for more activities. I didn't know we were looking to rent it out."

Evie laughed, a joyful peal. “Sounds like he has things well in hand. Someone who actually likes people dealing with people. And it’s working. What a stunning concept.”

It *did* make a fair bit of sense when she put it like that.

“It’s not terrible,” Max agreed.

“Just make sure he knows it, okay? That they both do,” Evie instructed. “Not everyone knows how to interpret grumpy Max.”

“If they haven’t figured out how to interpret grumpy Max by now, they would have fled screaming.”

Laughing again, Evie admitted, “It *is* something of an acquired skill.”

“How’s the bakery going?” Max asked.

She spent several minutes telling him all about how her coworker Adam was disgustingly in love with his husband. This was not, at all, what Max had asked. Eventually, he heard about her other coworkers, too—Simon was as sassy as ever, Joseph had had another amicable breakup, Liv was single and happy not to deal with people, and Maggie was still devoting all her time to the bakery—and finally, a little bit about her actual job.

“The catering’s going really well, which is awesome, but I actually have a call in about half an hour, so I’ve got to run. I’m glad everything’s working out. You sound happier.”

“I’m fine.” Max was *not* getting into a protracted discussion about his state of being.

“Love you,” Evie told him.

“Love you, too.”

Evie had started saying it to him after their parents died, and Max never failed to repeat it. When it suddenly felt like you were nearly alone in the world and so much had been taken away from you, well… Max had been determined to be everything Evie needed, and while he couldn’t remake his entire personality, he could ensure she knew that she was loved.

Staring down at his phone after the call ended, Max wondered if he *was* happier. It hadn’t occurred to him before, but now that Evie had brought it up, he supposed it was… true.

He hadn’t been expecting either Rory or Alex, and he was pretty sure that under any other circumstances, they wouldn’t have wound up working together like this. But here they all were. And despite the fact that Alex knew nothing about magic, and Rory thought he and Max were mates it was… nice. Truly, genuinely nice to have them both working with him.

It also seemed to fulfill a need for them, and it meant Max had more time for spellreading. The shop was cheerier and more alive. Rory sold more books than Max and Alex combined, and the added time Max had for spellwork meant he was bringing in more from that side of the business. (Alex's form had also helped a lot, and Max was cursing himself for not having thought to implement something like that himself. He'd just kept going with his mom and dad's method without really thinking about it. Having less back and forth with clients was awesome.) Somehow, with the two of them here, it wasn't even alarming when a siren brought Max out of the office, and he found that paramedics were rushing out a customer who was having a heart attack.

"He didn't look well," Rory told him quietly, "so I called 911. They think they got to him in time."

Max wasn't sure he would have been quite so calm, but Rory seemed to take it in stride, like dealing with the public sometimes meant people having a medical crisis in front of you.

Max stayed up front for another hour, just to make sure that Rory was okay, but the man reassured the other customers who'd been present, directed a couple to the health and exercise section, and seemed his normal self.

Max had never expected anyone like Rory in his life, but he found himself so grateful that he was here. With the extra money from Rory's people skills and Max's time to do spellreading, it meant that he could afford to suddenly have two employees.

Rory continued to insist that he didn't need anything more than room and board, which he said was super generous. He also didn't have a bank account, as it turned out, and Max had reluctantly agreed to keep his money for him. He wondered now if the normal world thought that Rory had died when he'd turned into a bird ten years ago (or however long ago it had actually been). Rory didn't seem perturbed by this at all, but Max was certain that at some point, Rory was going to want to reintegrate more with the world, and he was going to need money and the proper documentation to do it.

Max had brought up the idea of getting Rory ID several times—and not using the regular channels. Shifters and witches always knew forgers or someone on the inside who could help them out, because they often needed to shift their birth date or change names, depending on the situation.

But Rory shrugged it off, insisting that he had everything he needed right now, and Max really didn't have to worry. Max couldn't *help* but be

concerned. At some point, Rory was going to be off on his own again, and Max wanted to give him all the tools he needed to flourish.

But it wasn't easy to get on ID made for someone without their knowledge, so Max decided to leave it for now. Rory wasn't showing any signs of wanting to change his situation. To the contrary, any time that Max brought up something related to the outer world, it seemed to make Rory think that Max had grown tired of him, and then Rory got *sad*, and Max definitely didn't want that.

He wasn't trying to get rid of Rory, he was just trying to give Rory *options*. Everyone deserved to have options, but Rory seemed to have very firmly decided that his option was "here with Max." And if Max were being brutally honest, he didn't want to change that.

If someone had asked him a month ago if he could imagine someone living in his apartment with him, he'd have laughed them out of the room.

But Rory was different.

And yes, Max recognized that the fact that Rory turned into a bird every night probably meant there was something wrong with Max, but Rory never made him feel that way. He insisted it was something he was totally willing to do—and on occasion, he even stayed in his bird form or would suddenly flit into the spellbook room as a cardinal and perch on Max's shoulder. Max wasn't sure if it was for him or Rory or both of them, but… it worked weirdly well?

Nōwē didn't bat an eyelash at having a shifter around, and Alex had thankfully not asked any awkward questions about why Red was only there occasionally. Max might have implied that there was a cage in his apartment, but mostly, he just tried not to talk about it… And tried to remind himself that he couldn't break the Council's rules and potentially jeopardize the safety of magical folk just because Alex was awesome.

Max sighed and tried to concentrate on his job. He did his best to get out to the front of the bookshop at least a few times per day. He might not like to deal with people, but it *was* still his shop, and he didn't want Rory or Alex to feel like they'd been abandoned. (Yes, Max could spend eight hours with his spellbooks and not even notice. There was a reason he had alarms set on his phone to remind him to complete essential tasks.)

This afternoon, as he emerged, he found Rory on the phone, nodding his head to the caller even as he waved at the couple heading out of the shop.

"Yes, I'm sure we can manage that… Uh huh… I don't see why not… Yes, I'll double check and confirm with you. Would that be alright?… Wonderful.

Talk soon.”

He hung up the phone and turned to look at Max, practically vibrating with excitement. “Guess what!”

“I cannot even begin to imagine,” Max told him dryly.

“Don’t be mad,” Rory said with a bright smile.

Max groaned. “Oh, gods, what did you do?”

“You know how you’ve always wanted to visit Mr. Jones?”

Max stiffened, stunned. “Wait, are you saying…?”

Max had been trying to get a look at Mr. Jones’s collection for *years*, but the man was even more crotchety than Max was, and they seemed to do nothing but irritate one another.

Rory was beaming at him. “Yes! I called him when you got in that order for the Norwegian family spellbook, and at first, I was talking to his secretary, but then Mr. Jones had a question, and then we got to talking, and now he’s said that we can go and take a look at the collection, but it will need to be on a Saturday and Sunday. Is that okay?”

Was that *okay*?

“We can close the shop,” Max declared.

It was his shop. He could do whatever he wanted with it. Seeing Mr. Jones’s collection was the priority. He was rumored to have one of the most extensive private collections of spellbooks in the country.

“Well, I was thinking,” Rory said, looking at him carefully. “I know Alex can’t do more than eight hours on a weekend, but if they were comfortable with it, what if they covered the shift on Saturday? Only if they’re okay with it, of course. But it would give them the chance to practice opening and closing and show that you trust them.”

“Of course I trust them,” Max said, confused.

Rory smiled. “I know. It’s just nice to see concrete examples. Sunday is a quieter day anyway, so it matters less if we’re closed. But of course if they don’t think they’d like to do it or you’re not comfortable with it, we could close both days.”

Max said, “No, you’re right. It’s an excellent idea to ask Alex.”

And Max realized anew just how good an idea it was when he asked Alex, and they lit up visibly. Yeah, they definitely liked the idea of being trusted with that responsibility.

“Only if you’re sure you’re okay with it,” Max cautioned, just in case.

Alex still looked delighted. “Of course I’m sure. It’s one eight-hour shift. That’s a totally normal length. And I know a lot of the customers. I can

handle anyone who might come along."

Max considered this. "Okay, just remember that your safety is our top priority. If you run into any issues you can't handle, the most important thing is that you stay safe. I can sort anything else out afterwards."

Alex looked a little bit touched and mostly amused. "Are you trying to coach me through the incredibly unlikely event of the shop getting robbed? Are you expecting a mid-day Saturday burglary?"

Max grimaced. "It's not super likely, sure, but you never know!"

Alex patted his arm. "Max, I'll be fine. I have your number, and I have Rory's number. I know how to call my mom or the police, and yes, I promise that I'll run away if I have to—but I'm pretty sure it's going to be a very ordinary day, and the most exciting thing that will happen is customers buying books."

Alex was almost definitely right. Max reminded himself that they were only going a couple of hours away, and he was probably being ridiculous.

He hadn't liked leaving Evie in charge of the store, either. But as he thought about it, he remembered that his parents had left him in charge sometimes. Not super often, but they'd trusted that he would be able to handle it as he'd grown older, and he'd managed just fine.

Max blew out a breath. He was being ridiculous, and he really didn't want Alex to think he didn't trust them. It was more like Max didn't trust anyone else, but that wasn't super helpful. There was no particular reason why this should be dangerous for Alex, and their youth shouldn't make it a lot more dangerous. Maybe someone would see them and take advantage, but the customers were used to seeing Alex working without Max, since Max was often in the back, and their size was beneficial.

It was going to be fine. And if wasn't fine, they could drive back.

"Do you want me to feed Nōwē while you're away?" Alex asked.

Max hadn't even thought of that yet, which probably meant that Nōwē was going to kill him, and he'd deserve it. He didn't travel. Evie came to him. There'd never been a need to have someone take care of Nōwē. But they definitely couldn't bring her with them, and while she'd actually survive until they were back on Sunday, she definitely wouldn't be happy about it.

"You're sure you wouldn't mind? I can pay you," Max told them.

Alex rolled their eyes. "It's fine. I'm here anyway. I can even stop by on Sunday morning if you want, so she doesn't think that you're starving her to death."

Since Max had *just* asked if they minded, he probably shouldn't repeat the question. If Alex didn't want to do it, they wouldn't have offered, right?

Max eyed them. "You're not just saying this because I'm your boss, are you?"

Alex's eye roll was even bigger this time. "Of course not. When you're my boss, I do my job. I'm offering to take care of Nōwē because she's awesome—and I don't want her to trip me and kill me when I'm not looking."

That was fair. Max couldn't argue with that.

"That would be really awesome. Thank you."

Rory had already texted the D&D group and moved their session to Thursday, so that they could get out to Mr. Jones's estate Friday night. He wanted to meet with them at eight o'clock Saturday morning, and he was putting them up Friday and Saturday night, assuming all went well.

Everything was all arranged, but Max's stomach was still burbling uncertainly a few hours later, and Rory gave him a hug.

"It's going to be okay," Rory assured him. "Alex can contact us if they need anything, and we're not that far away."

Wrapping his arms around Rory and closing his eyes, Max wondered if his parents had felt like this the first time they'd let him manage the shop alone. If so, they hadn't shown it, and Max had been supremely confident that he could handle it. (He'd practically grown up there. Why wouldn't he be able to handle it?) There were plenty of things that could have gone wrong, but none of them had.

With a sigh, Max let his arms fall and stepped back. Rory was smiling softly at him.

"I know it will probably be fine," Max said.

"And you want to look at Mr. Jones's collection."

Max couldn't help but nod. "I really do. I can't believe he told you we could come."

Mr. Jones hadn't let Max's mother visit the collection, and he'd resisted all of Max's efforts for nearly fifteen years.

Rory had had *one conversation* with the man and somehow convinced him to change his mind.

"You're amazing, you know," Max told him. "I'm so excited to see the collection, and you made it happen!"

Rory's cheeks went pink, and he looked pleased. "I'm still not sure what I did, but I'm glad it worked."

It couldn’t *just* be Max being a bit rude, though that probably hadn’t helped. His mother had been much more polite than he was, but she hadn’t managed it, either. But there *was* something particularly engaging about Rory. Max had felt it from the first moment he’d met him—even when he’d thought he was a bird—and it seemed like Mr. Jones felt it, too.

Max was glad Rory was very good at people.



By Friday, Evie had texted her shock that Max was actually leaving the bookshop and going away for a weekend twenty-seven times, Max and Rory were both packed—Max had dug out a duffel bag that Rory could use—and Max had given Alex the spare set of keys for the shop and the apartment and made sure that Alex knew how to use them.

Alex, despite pointing out that they’d been locking and unlocking doors for *years*, gamely demonstrated their ability.

The weather was cool, but it was unlikely they suddenly needed to worry about a freak snowstorm or anything that was going to prevent Alex from walking to work.

Alex laughed at him. “Oh, my god, it’s fine. I’ll text tomorrow. Nothing will go wrong. Stop worrying.”

Max wondered if this was what it felt like to have a kid, and he wasn’t sure he was cut out for it. Was it normal to worry all the time?

(Then he thought of the years when he’d taken care of Evie after their parents had died. Yeah, it was exactly like that. It didn’t exactly go away, but it had lessened a little as she’d gotten older and proved that she could take care of herself. Maybe the same thing would happen as Alex got older? Not that they were Max’s sibling *or* child, but… still.)

Max did his best to stop worrying. “Try not to burn the shop down while I’m gone.”

Alex scoffed at him. “We both know that if anyone’s going to burn the place down, it’s going to be Nōwē.”

That was true enough. Max turned to the cat. “Try not to burn the place down while I’m gone.”

Nōwē regarded him with supreme indifference and began to groom herself.

Rory said, “As long as you continue to keep her in the style to which she is accustomed, she’s not going to burn the shop down.”

That was probably true.

Alex nodded. “And that’s why I’m going to come feed her and make sure she has fresh water. We might even cuddle with some books for a few hours if that’s okay.”

“If you want to, sure,” Max agreed.

Alex had taped up the sign earlier in the week that they’d be closed on Sunday (a much nicer and more artistic sign than Max would have managed), and Max had put it up on the website as well. Ideally, they would have given more notice, but there was no way that Max was missing this opportunity.

It wasn’t like he closed often. The last time he’d had to close the shop had been a couple years ago when he’d gotten horribly sick. Witches were generally hardier than normal people, and shifters were hardier than witches, but it didn’t mean they couldn’t still be laid low. Max blamed it entirely on people, who had clearly been oozing germs all over his bookshop. He sanitized high-touch areas, but no system was perfect.

“You’ve got all the numbers?” Max asked.

Alex held up their phone. “In my phone, where they’ve been for weeks. We have a text thread, Max. I really can do this, you know. Nothing’s going to happen to me.”

They looked a bit exasperated and a bit fond.

And suddenly, Max realized why he was so stressed about this. Because he was a fool.

He forced a smile. “Of course everything’s going to be fine. Sorry. Haven’t left the store in anyone’s hands but my sister’s, and that was more than a decade ago. I know you’ve got this.”

Alex squared their shoulders. “I totally do. And you and Rory are going to go look at your fancy books, and it’s going to be awesome, right?”

“Right,” Max agreed.

“And I’ll see you on Monday, just like normal,” Alex added.

“After you text me all weekend so that I know you’re still alive and Nōwē hasn’t taken over and started asking for payments in cans of tuna.”

Nōwē’s ears pricked forward.

“You shouldn’t give her ideas,” Rory told him.

Alex laughed. “Yes, I will text you all weekend.”

They waved Alex off and managed the last hour until the shop closed. Now that it was getting darker earlier, Alex had started texting when they got home to reassure Max. He’d offered to walk them, but they’d scoffed and said they could manage.

Max would revisit the conversation once it was dark out by five.

Rory had reminded all the customers that they were closed this Sunday but would have regular hours the rest of the week. To anyone who’d asked, Rory had told them that there was a potential book sale that they were looking into.

Max would have just told them to mind their own business. He was impressed that Rory had managed to tell the truth with enough vagueness that it wouldn’t seem odd if no books ever came out of it. It wasn’t like Max owed them his inventory, but Rory had made it sound connected to the business and thus made the customers still feel valued, without making it sound interesting enough that they had a lot more questions.

At eight, they locked up the shop, fed Nōwē, and locked her into the apartment (she was not delighted by this) before heading out the back with their bags. Earlier in the day, Rory had packed them a portable dinner that he assured Max he could eat even while driving.

Mr. Jones’s secretary had apparently approved their arriving after 10 o’clock at night. Mr. Jones wouldn’t be awake to receive them, but they could settle into their room and be ready to meet him in the morning.

Max hadn’t thought too much about needing to drive in the dark, though. He didn’t drive much anymore, and it showed. But he still picked up orders sometimes, and there were a few people that he made deliveries to, because they’d been customers forever and they couldn’t get down to the shop for whatever reason.

It was all fine. Totally fine.

Max plugged his phone in and got the GPS set up, letting its automated voice tell him how to get out of the city, even though he could have managed that part on his own. He wasn’t expecting too much traffic at this time of night, and the drive was mostly up I-95, but it was always good to have a redirect on hand in case of any unexpected occurrences.

Once they were out of the city, Rory asked, “Would you like a sandwich? I made your favorite.”

Max felt himself relax a little. “Yes, please.”

Rory had apparently cut the crust off his PB&J *and* cut it into triangles.

Max popped a quarter into his mouth and kept his eyes on the road. Rory kept handing him pieces of sandwich, and this was followed up with grapes and cubes of cheese—also easy to pop into his mouth while driving.

Rory always had the container ready, and Max could reach in and grab something without even looking down. With his other hand, Rory was snacking himself.

Once his stomach was no longer grumbling, Max said, “Thanks.”

Rory snapped the lid back on the container. “There’s more if you get hungry again. Oh, and I packed cookies, too, for dessert. Ice cream seemed like a bad idea.”

Max laughed. “Yeah, not the best. Maybe a bit later for the cookies.”

Nodding, Rory, tucked the containers back in the bag in the foot well. It was quiet for a few minutes, marked by the streetlights throwing pools of light before they passed into the darkness again, and then the cycle repeated, over and over.

Max wasn’t sure how much later it was when Rory asked quietly, “Are you alright?”

Max realized he was clutching the steering wheel too tightly and made himself stretch out his hands one at a time and try to loosen his grip.

After a moment, Max admitted, “My parents were killed in a car crash.”

Rory breathed out an audible breath. “Oh, Max, I’m so sorry. Are you okay to drive?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Max assured him. “I made sure both Evie and I went to therapy, and I kept driving, because I didn’t want to turn it into something I’d be afraid to do. It’s too useful, and it was too essential, especially when Evie was younger.”

Boston had good transit, sure, but there were plenty of places he needed to go for books that weren’t on any sort of transit route.

“That makes sense,” Rory said after a minute. “I’m still sorry if this is hard for you.”

“It was black ice. No one to blame. Just bad luck.” He swallowed. “They died almost instantly, apparently, which I guess is a blessing.”

He wouldn’t have wanted them to suffer, and it was highly unlikely that a witch specializing in healing spells could have gotten to them fast enough. He still wondered, sometimes, but he’d mostly trained his brain not to dwell on it.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t help them,” Rory said, sounding unhappy.

That was a weird thing to say, but Max understood the sentiment—and he'd been confronted with months of bookshop clients who had tried to awkwardly express their sympathy, not knowing what to say but not wanting to say nothing.

"It was a long time ago," Max said, trying to hit the right tone. Not dismissive, but maybe a bit distant. "It was a terrible, senseless tragedy. And while it's quite unlikely anything like that will happen again"—It was mid-October and still too warm for black ice—"I was the one in charge of the bookshop while they were gone." He drew in a deep breath and blew it out, swallowing around the lump in his throat. "The police showed up to tell me what had happened."

"Max," Rory breathed.

He swallowed again. "It was almost midnight by the time they tracked us down. Pounded on the back door of the shop. So it's not like this has any real resemblance to what happened…"

Alex wasn't staying over. Alex wasn't their next of kin. It just—

Rory squeezed his arm comfortingly. "I won't let anything happen to us, I promise."

The calm, absolute certainty in his voice made something unwind in Max, even as he recognized that was a promise no one could make. But somehow, it set something at ease in him.

Max cleared his throat. "I know it's unlikely something will happen."

Rory's hand was still there on his arm, a warm, comforting weight. "Life can always be unpredictable. The only way to avoid all risks is to avoid everything, and that would be an impossibly restricted life. You're not taking daredevil risks, but you're still doing what you need to do. And it's obvious you're a careful driver. It's totally normal for fears and anxieties to be there regardless of any rational reason for them."

Max blew out a breath. That was true enough. His therapist had made clear that any reaction was an acceptable one, though some could cause harm and some could reduce harm; they just tried to aim for harm reduction as often as they could.

Max had been so determined to be there for Evie and to make sure she still had good things in her life. It had carried him through a lot of the aftermath. And burying himself in the bookshop and making sure that his parents' shop lived on had helped, too.

Maybe Max hadn't thought a lot about what he wanted for himself in the beginning, but it felt like he'd gotten closer to it now. He really did love

identifying spells and making them accessible. And with Rory and Alex managing the shop, that was easier than ever.

"I'm really glad we got to do this," Max told Rory, managing a smile. "Thank you again for setting it up."

"You're very welcome," Rory said, and Max could hear the smile in his voice. "I'm really glad it worked out. I know it's something you wanted to do."

Max considered this. "What do *you* want to do with your life?"

He hadn't asked that before, and it suddenly felt like he was a horrible friend.

But Rory assured him, "Oh, I'm doing what I'd like to be doing with my life."

Max was startled. "Driving to an old book collection on a Friday night?"

Rory laughed. "Yes. But not because it's driving to an old book collection on a Friday night. It's getting to spend time with you, whatever that is."

He sounded so matter-of-fact and earnest. Max couldn't doubt his sincerity, though he still wasn't sure how he felt about the whole mate thing. But Rory hadn't been pushy about it. Instead, he simply seemed genuinely happy with whatever time they spent together.

Max was used to people having more ambitious goals—and to them becoming annoyed with Max when his goals weren't as lofty. Especially with normal people at school, stating that he was planning to go back home and work with his parents at their bookshop had apparently been incredibly underwhelming. It wasn't even like Max had envisioned being in charge of the shop. Back then, he'd expected he'd have decades more with his parents.

But he was a Spellreader, and he'd studied with his mother, and it had always seemed obvious that was where he was going to end up. He hadn't desired big and lofty things, certainly not the fame or fortune that was common. Staying under the radar was still the best defense for witches and shifters.

So if Max wasn't particularly ambitious, why did he think that Rory should have to want more?

"I'm glad you're happy with what you're doing right now," Max said carefully. "It's been good to have you here." He cleared his throat. "The cookies in the shop are awesome."

Rory laughed softly, sounding fond. Max kept his eyes on the road. "I'm glad you enjoy them. I know the people who want more and more and more are often the loudest, but there's something very satisfying about figuring out

how to be happy with what you have. And if the situation you find yourself in is exactly what you want, well… there's simply no way to be anything *but* happy."

Max was pretty sure that people figured out ways to be unhappy all the time, in every sort of circumstance, but it was equally obvious that wasn't how Rory functioned. He'd spent a decade as a bird, then fallen into Max's life—literally—and taken to working in a bookshop like he'd been born to do it. If Max had been a teacher, would he have become a teaching assistant? Or a firefighter or an accountant or an astronaut?

Max had a weird feeling that the answer to that question was "yes," which was ridiculous (and impractical), and yet…

Was this fate? Was that why Rory seemed to be so well-suited to the life that Max was living? Why he didn't have family or friends or a life that might conflict with Max's own?

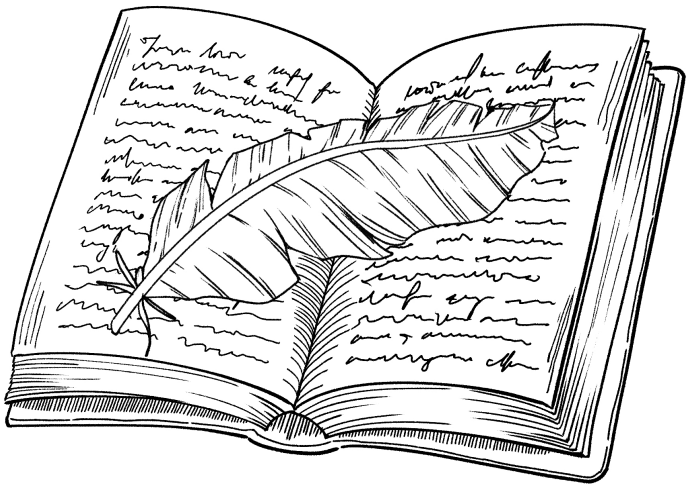
Or was that simply chance? Was Max reading into random circumstances precisely because Rory had introduced the idea of fate? Was it like suddenly seeing babies everywhere if you were expecting, or noticing white cars because you'd just bought one?

Could fate actually be playing a role, but Max had never noticed it before? He grimaced. But did that mean his parents had been *fated* to die? Because that idea was just awful.

But no, Rory hadn't been saying that everything in the world was fated, just that magic seemed to know when two people were compatible, when they had an excellent chance of being together… if they chose to take that chance. No one and nothing was trying to compel Max to do anything—or even if they were, Rory had made the decision to be totally hands off. He wasn't trying to lure Max into anything, which wouldn't have worked anyway. Was he, in fact, doing the thing most likely to work on Max? But was that because they were fated or because they *were* compatible and so they actually fit together?

Max's head had started to hurt, and it was almost a relief when the GPS announced, "Your destination is on the left."

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Chapter Ten

Rory

Road safety was clearly very important to Max, and distracted driving was dangerous, so Rory had been careful to try not to bother him. He was glad Max had felt comfortable telling him about what had happened to his parents, but he really wished Max hadn't had such an experience in his past. Losing people wasn't easy, and losing them young was the worst. Max should have had decades more happy memories with his parents, and instead, he'd been without them for almost fifteen years.

But if there was one thing Rory had learned over his very long life, it was that you couldn't predict what the future would bring. It was part of why Rory had gotten so good at going with the flow.

Only now the flow had brought Rory to Max, and Rory wasn't going to let anything get in the way of the two of them being together—in whatever way Max wanted—unless it was Max himself who wanted Rory to leave. Thus far, at least, that didn't seem to be the case. As far as Rory could tell, he was happy that Rory was there, and that made Rory feel good.

Rory was also delighted that he'd been able to arrange this, even if it had been kind of accidental. As he looked up at the imposing gates, he hoped it was going to end well.

Max buzzed at the entrance, and they were promptly let in, which was a good start. Even though it was after ten, they'd clearly been expected. As

they passed through the gate, Rory felt the wash of spells pass over them, showing that the grounds were protected by more than mundane means.

Max shivered, and the gates closed behind them. This late at night, it almost felt like they were driving into a tunnel, with trees on either side of the road stretching up over their heads. In daylight or with a full moon, there'd be a lot more to see, but on an overcast night, everything just felt… close.

Finally, they emerged from the trees to find a huge house looming. It had columns and balconies and what Rory was pretty sure were a lot of windows, though it was hard to tell for sure in the dark.

"That's really big," Rory observed.

Max snorted. "Yeah, Mr. Jones used a lot of money to acquire all his books. He comes from old money, and his family owns some company or other. I didn't pay much attention." He peered around them. "Where do you think we're supposed to park?"

"Oh!" Rory said, suddenly remembering what the secretary had told him over the phone. "Around the back on the right there's a place for staff to park."

Max followed Rory's instructions, and they were soon walking up to the side entrance, bags clasped in their hands.

Max reached out to press the button for the doorbell but paused as he looked over at Rory. "You want to do it?"

Rory grinned at him and gleefully pressed the doorbell.

Whoever had invented buttons was very clever.

It was perhaps fifteen or twenty seconds before the door was pulled open. An imposing-looking woman was standing there, her graying hair pulled back, her eyes and skin dark. She was dressed in a long navy-blue dress. The buzz along Rory's skin told him that she was a witch.

Her voice was low. "Yes?"

Rory held out his hand. "Hello! I'm Rory and this is Max. Mr. Jones and Mr. Holcroft are expecting us. Well, not expecting to see us tonight because it's way too late, and I hope we didn't keep you up. If we did, I'm sorry. But the bookshop doesn't close until eight on Fridays, and we left just as soon as it closed, and here we are!"

The woman blinked at him, seeming to take a moment to process everything that Rory had said, and then she reached out, offered a brief

handshake, and then stepped back. Her expression was a little less severe than it had been.

“Sirs, I’m Mrs. Davenport, the housekeeper. Mr. Holcroft did indeed relay that you were on your way. Please come in. We have a room prepared for you.”

Rory and Max entered the house. This side entrance was bigger than most of Max’s apartment, and it appeared to be a sort of… mud room? Was that the right word? Rory made sure to wipe his shoes against the mat on the way in, and Max did the same.

“This way,” Mrs. Davenport told them.

They followed her into a dimly lit kitchen that was large and cavernous. Everything looked scrupulously clean, and there were some appliances on the counter that Rory could just make out and would have liked to ask questions about, but now didn’t seem to be the time.

They passed through the kitchen and into a hallway, and after a couple of turns, they began to go up a set of narrow stairs. They went up three flights and then emerged into a hallway that was decorated with various vases and paintings and sculptures. The light was dim again, and Rory wondered if the entire house was set to “light saver mode” at night or something like that. It wouldn’t have felt out of place for Mrs. Davenport to be carrying a lamp that they needed to follow.

“This must be quite a bit to keep clean!” Rory told Mrs. Davenport. “Max and I just have to contend with the bookshop and the apartment above, and that seems like quite enough.”

“We use an array of cleaning spells that help a lot,” Mrs. Davenport informed him, having either caught the magical buzz from them or having already been informed of their nature. “But you’re right, it’s quite a large house to keep tidy.”

“Well, everything looks lovely,” Rory assured her.

“Thank you, sir,” she said. “We do try.”

Down two more corridors, and Rory was hopelessly lost—he was quite good with directions outside!—but the housekeeper opened a door on their right.

“Here we are,” she told them, flipping a light switch so that the room was flooded with light, which seemed quite bright compared to the dimness of the hallways.

The room was about the size of Max's living/dining room and kitchen. There was a large four-poster bed, an old painting in an ornate frame on the wall opposite, and large windows that had curtains pulled across to keep out the night. Mrs. Davenport pointed out the closet, the bathroom, and the phone—another old-fashioned one with a cord!—they could use to call for service at any time of the night or day.

"We're just going to go to bed," Rory assured her. "But if we needed to call in the morning, do you think someone could direct us to where we're meeting Mr. Jones? Unless Max is way better at directions than me, we have no idea where we are right now."

"You're welcome to have breakfast first, if you wish. It's available as of 6:30 in the kitchens, and we can have someone direct you whenever you're ready. Just call down."

"Will do," Rory said cheerfully. "Thank you."

That was an excellent idea. It made way more sense to go to the meeting on a full stomach and not risk interrupting anything with loud stomach growls.

"Yes, thank you," Max echoed. "We appreciate your hospitality."

Poor Max sounded a bit stiff and awkward, but he'd been very polite.

Mrs. Davenport inclined her head and then left the room, pulling the door closed behind her.

Max blew out a breath. "I feel like we walked back into the 1800s."

"There is something about the place that gives that sort of feel," Rory agreed, though there were also numerous elements that put the lie to that possibility. "I'm very grateful for the excellent indoor plumbing."

Laughing, Max agreed, "Oh, yes, absolutely. While I'm interested in time travel on principle, I assume that it's actually a lot more uncomfortable than it's usually portrayed."

"You'd have to get used to a lot," Rory said. "Expectations change, you know? And technology develops."

"And while I might not like every modern invention, indoor plumbing, coffee machines, and modern medicine are kind of essential to my everyday existence," Max continued.

Rory smiled. "Yes, exactly. We *can* learn to live without rather a lot, but it's much nicer when we can be genuinely comfortable."

"Though we don't need *this*," Max pointed out, gesturing around at the large room.

“Well, no,” Rory acknowledged. “Although, you could fit a lot more books in.”

This made Max laugh, as Rory had intended.

“True,” Max agreed. “But somehow, I don’t think Mr. Jones would be delighted if I started filling his room with my books. Let’s get ready for bed.”

They took turns in the bathroom, changing into pajamas while the other person was occupied. Max texted Alex and let them know the two of them had arrived safely, and he cast a ward on the door, locking it and ensuring they wouldn’t be disturbed for the night.

“Can’t someone break it with ‘undo’?” Rory asked.

Max shook his head. “No, wards like this typically have ‘and will not respond to undo’ written into them. Spellsmiths were aware that wards wouldn’t be much good if people could easily break them. Sometimes they added trigger words, so that a ward could be broken with a specified phrase that would be kept secret, or people of the same family or blood might be able to get through it without breaking it. Or they could be set to break after a certain amount of time. Spells also aren’t powered indefinitely, so unless the wards are renewed, they fail eventually on their own. Many wards also have a failsafe in them of a couple people or combination of people who can bring them down.”

“Isn’t there a risk that it could be misused?”

“It’s possible,” Max conceded. “But the caster would usually pick carefully who that is. A well-crafted spell might specify that the caster and the person they indicate are the fail safes. The flip side of not having that exception is that if something goes wrong, the wards are impenetrable until they fail from lack of power, which could be years later if they’re cast well.”

Rory made a face. “Oh, I see how that would be a problem.”

He could just wait out wards like that, no matter how long it took, but most people didn’t have that option.

“Sometimes the spells are written so that they fail with the owner of the wards,” Max continued to explain. “That can help prevent that sort of problem. It can cause other problems, of course, if the ward is protecting something and needs to not fail. That’s why it’s important to know the exact parameters of a spell. And if you can’t afford to have a Spellsmith make you a bespoke spell that does exactly what you want, then you need a

Spellreader to read an existing spell and tell you exactly what it does. You can see how a spell that someone just says ‘is a ward’ doesn’t tell you enough about it, right?”

Rory was nodding. “Oh, yes, I see what you mean. I never really thought about it before.”

Rory had spent time with a lot of witches over the years, but he’d never really needed to understand exactly how spells worked. If he’d known it at one point, he’d forgotten it again.

It made a lot of sense, though, and it explained why so many witches called Max to get him to find them the spell that they needed. Rory had grasped the idea before, but these details made it even more clear why it was so important.

“Also.” Max pointed. “That bed has an honest-to-God canopy.”

It really did. There were velvet curtains that had been gathered at each of the posts and tied with gold-threaded rope. There was a mountain of pillows, but the huge headboard rose up even above them. It had been carved into an array of different flowers and vines. There was a frame on top of the posts, and the velvet was draped over that. It looked like it would make a very cozy cocoon if you let the curtains down. It probably helped a lot in the winter, back when there was no such thing as central heating. It made Rory think of times long gone.

Max huffed a breath. “Let’s hope the mattress has been replaced more recently.”

Rory laughed, and they climbed into the bed. Yeah, at some point someone had invested in a pillowtop mattress that had definitely been made in this century. The large quilt in a softly colorful pattern looked like it had been handmade. There were a few moments where Max grumbled and chucked pillows on the floor.

“How is anyone supposed to sleep when they’re being suffocated in pillows?” he demanded.

Rory laughed. It was nice to have a few pillows to prop yourself up when you were reading, but they’d been surrounded by about ten times that number of fluffy accessories.

The bed definitely dominated the room, and while it would have been absurd in a smaller space, it fit this large room with its other antique furniture.

They read for perhaps a half an hour, and then Rory set his book aside. The main characters had just spent the night together, and Rory was pretty sure that things were about to go wrong until everything was finally fully resolved. If he didn't stop now, he was going to be up all night finishing it.

Max set his book aside, too, and then he fidgeted, the blankets rustling.

"Is everything okay?" Rory asked.

Max blurted out, "Would you sleep in the bed tonight? As a human?"

Rory blinked at him, surprised.

Max blew out a breath and then said, "Platonically, of course. My sister and I shared a bed for a few weeks following the crash, and I'm not in strange places all that often, and—"

Rory laid a hand on Max's arm. "Of course. And if you change your mind, just let me know, and I can easily turn into a bird, okay?"

Max looked uncertain for a moment, and then he nodded faintly. "Yeah. Thanks." He reached out and turned out the light, and they were plunged into darkness. Max huffed out a breath. "It's harder to hear your breathing when you're a bird, did you know?"

Rory laughed as he lay down in the bed, shuffling further under the covers, pushing more of the pillows off the bed, and getting comfy on the one that he'd kept.

"Yeah, I'd be in a lot of trouble if I breathed as heavily as a human in bird form."

Max snorted, shifting around. "I suppose that wouldn't work." He was silent for a moment. "Thanks for coming with me."

"You're very welcome," Rory assured him. "I just hope it all works out."

They were meeting Mr. Jones tomorrow, but who was to say if he'd actually let Max see the collection or that it would be what Max hoped for.

Almost like Max had read his mind, he said, "It's more than I've ever gotten to do before. I really appreciate it. Goodnight, Rory."

"Goodnight, Max."

It had been years since Rory had slept in human form. No other animal required as much accouterments as humans did. Although he supposed that there were others who liked comfier options when they could find them. And babies often had accommodations, of course. But humans had box springs and mattresses and sheets and blankets and pillows—and sometimes canopy beds with velvet curtains.

They’d invented such interesting things, and Rory hoped that they would continue to invent good and interesting things in the future.

He listened to Max’s breathing even out and deepen, and the knowledge that Max had fallen asleep soothed Rory and allowed him to fall asleep as well.



Max’s alarm woke them in the morning, and they practically tumbled out of bed, took turns in the bathroom, threw clothes on, and then called to be retrieved so that they wouldn’t lose themselves on the way to the kitchen. Max had seemed a little tense as well as grumpy and barely conscious when they’d woken, but it had slowly faded away as Rory had treated him exactly like he normally did.

Rory was going to convince his mate one day that he wasn’t ever going to put pressure on Max to do anything he didn’t want to do, but Rory knew that would take time.

The smells coming out of the kitchen were so amazing that they could almost have navigated there with their noses. Rory knew not everyone agreed, but he thought pumpkin spice was the best invention ever. It made everything smell warm and cozy. Cinnamon was the best. Also ginger. And nutmeg. Rory inhaled deeply. They were all the best!

When they reached the kitchen, everything looked as good as it smelled, too, an array of breakfast foods that would outdo the diner Rory and Max had gone to with Alex. (And this time, Rory got to eat the food!)

Rory piled a bit of everything onto his plate: scrambled eggs, bacon, a pancake, a waffle, a piece of French toast, and yogurt with fresh berries and granola on top.

“Wow,” Rory exclaimed. “This is amazing! Thank you so much for such a fabulous breakfast!”

The cook waved this aside, though she looked pleased. She was a plump, round-faced woman with pale skin who looked to be in her forties. Her energy said she was a witch, though, and Rory was pretty sure she was actually in her sixties. It wasn't an exact art, knowing how old someone was, but Rory had been around for long enough that his feelings were usually right.

She introduced herself as Fiona Finch, and she was a witch who had a little golden finch as a familiar. The bird flitted around the room but came to cuddle against Rory and twitter his curiosity.

Mrs. Finch looked surprised but pleased. "Buttercup is often a little hesitant around strangers, but he clearly likes you."

"I'm very likable," Rory told her with a wink.

She chortled and brought him more food.

She also had lots of coffee for Max, which he drank gratefully, a look of bliss on his face. Shifters usually metabolized stimulants too fast for them to be particularly useful, and Rory had never quite understood humans' love of coffee and tea or that weird new desire for *energy drinks*. Food gave you energy. Why would you need to market a drink like that?

For Rory, Mrs. Finch made steamed milk with lots of spices in it.

After a sip, Rory asked, "Would you like to come work in a bookshop? We could get a fancy coffee maker."

She laughed merrily.

Rory cleared his whole plate and had seconds. He might even have tried for thirds, but then the secretary showed up, ready to take them to their meeting. They obviously couldn't be late because Rory wanted to stuff his face with more delicious food.

Mrs. Finch smiled at him. "I'll have lunch and dinner for you later. And you can always stop by if you need a snack. Not to worry."

"That's so generous. Thank you. I can't wait!" Rory assured her.

"Thank you," Max echoed, looking faintly amused by Rory's enthusiasm and maybe grateful that he didn't have to say more.

Mr. Jones's secretary was tall, blond, pale-skinned, blue-eyed, and incredibly handsome. He looked to be in his early thirties, but he was a shifter. His aging was beginning to slow, and he was probably in his late forties or early fifties.

He shook hands with both of them.

“I’m Peter Holcroft, Mr. Jones’s secretary. Please call me Peter. So nice to meet both of you. Thank you for coming. Mr. Jones is waiting in the library.”

Max nearly vibrated with excitement but looked like he was trying to appear calm and collected. Rory wanted to grin but resisted. Max was adorable, but he probably wouldn’t appreciate being told so.

Peter led them confidently through the house, which was full of wood paneling and beautiful art and decor. Honestly, though, Rory couldn’t imagine having this much space and this many belongings. It seemed like an awful lot to worry about.

They reached a set of closed double doors, and Peter knocked on the door and then opened it as a quavering voice bid them enter.

The room was dim, with what looked like huge windows mostly obscured by large curtains. There were books *everywhere*. It was floor-to-ceiling books, including on a second level, and there were honest-to-goodness ladders that could be wheeled around the shelves. Rory immediately wanted to leap on one of them, but he managed to restrain himself. Barely.

The shelves contained a riot of colors and textures, though it looked like a great many of the books were leather-bound volumes. Probably not a lot of books like these ended up in Max’s bookshop, not unless they were for serious collectors.

There was a fireplace at one end of the room, with a fire screen up and a safe space between it and the closest bookshelves. Next to the fire was an old man in a wheelchair with a tortoiseshell cat that had a beautiful mix of orange and black fur curled up in his blanketed lap.

Ah. Rory had wondered why the man had decided that now was the time to share his collection. He was a bit hunched over, and his white hair was mostly wisps now. When he looked up at them, though, his eyes were still keen, though their blue was a bit watery. His skin looked paper-thin, mottled with age spots, traceries of blue veins visible. He was carefully petting the cat, whose ears pricked forward as she looked at them, but otherwise she gave no indication of noticing their presence.

The man was very old indeed for a witch.

He was unquestionably dying. Rory would probably have known that without his gift, but with it, he could see just how close the witch was to the end of his mortal life. Rory couldn’t pinpoint an exact day, but they were talking weeks at most, not months.

“Here are Mr. March and Mr. Brand from the Read for a Spell bookshop, sir,” Peter said.

The old man’s voice quavered but still held that trace of impatience and drive that had no doubt been part of what helped him live this long. “Come here, come here.”

They crossed the room until they were standing in front of him. Rory went to his knees.

“May I say hello to your familiar?”

The man sniffed. “Yes. Fine.”

Rory held out his fingers, and the kitty opened one eye, sniffed, and then, reached out and licked them, her tongue a soft rasp against Rory’s skin.

Rory smiled and said, “Hello, little one. This isn’t such a bad life, is it, curled up and warm with someone to pet you all the time?”

She meowed at him. She was content, but she was *tired*.

“I know,” Rory said softly. “Soon you’ll be able to sleep.”

The old man’s eyes were keen upon him. “She sleeps all the time as it is.”

Rory looked up. “And when the time comes, she’ll be able to sleep some more.”

“No other options?” Mr. Jones asked.

Shaking his head slowly, Rory asked, “Are other options desired? Or does the time not come when you get to lay down your burden and rest?”

The man drew in a breath, then coughed, but he waved aside his secretary when the man tried to bring him a glass of water.

“I suppose so. I’d begun to think I was going to have to live forever.” He eyed Max. “Are you sure he’s up to the task?”

Rory smiled. “If the task is books or spells, no one could be a better choice than Max. He cares for them very deeply.”

The man blew out a breath. “I wasn’t sure. You hear tales, you know, of what unscrupulous Spellreaders and Spellsmiths can do.”

“I beg your pardon,” Max said stiffly, “but I am always *extremely* scrupulous when it comes to my spells.”

The man wheezed, and it became clear after a moment that he was laughing. When his amusement finally subsided, his face a bit too red, he said, “I know, I know.” He waved a hand at Peter. “I had him call you for spells a few times, just to see what you would send.”

Max stiffened. “There are people who actually need spells, you know. I don’t have time to waste on rich people who have more money than sense!”

Mr. Jones glared back. “Sometimes you have to be patient, young man. It takes time to be certain of things.”

Max gestured. “It looks like you’ve about expended all the time allotted to you!”

It was Peter’s turn to stiffen, and Rory said, “Wow. I see why the two of you always fought when you talked to one another. You’re very similar.”

They both glared at him, and Rory laughed. “Yes, yes, and now you’re both annoyed. Max, I’m sure Mr. Jones wasn’t testing you for fun. And Mr. Jones, Max really does have a lot of witches that he helps with spells. It matters to him that spells be accessible and that people get reliable information about those spells.”

“Will you look at a few spells for me?” Mr. Jones asked.

“Testing me again?” Max asked sourly. “Were the earlier tests not enough?”

“You have demonstrated the ability to send me spells that meet the parameters I have set, but I don’t know that you identified the spells.”

Max looked for a moment like he was going to lose his temper, but then he suddenly nodded. “They could have been already labeled by my mother, you mean, and I just sent you the results. Yes, that’s fair enough. Some of the work in the shop is certainly hers, or even my great-grandfather’s. Our goal has always been to make the knowledge accessible, and we aren’t about to get rid of the work of previous generations. What would you like me to look at?”

Mr. Jones gave a nod to Peter, who produced several sheets of paper from a locked drawer.

He set them down on a desk by the window, and Max went over to inspect them.

“The first is a fire spell. It is designed to burn only the item that it is directed at and nothing else. The undo spell doesn’t work for it, but it has a counter. Would you like me to say the counter word?”

Mr. Jones smiled. “No, thank you. That is acceptable.”

Max moved to the second spell, and after barely a glance, he declared, “This is not a spell.”

“No?” Mr. Jones asked.

Curious, Rory came over to look over Max’s shoulder. “It looks like a spell.”

Max nodded. “It does. But it’s not. I’m guessing it’s an effort of a witch who isn’t a Spellsmith, who tried to make a spell as so many do. Thankfully, this is one of the ones that simply *isn’t.*”

“What else could it be?” Rory asked, confused.

Max grimaced. “If someone who is not a Spellsmith takes a spell and makes a minor modification in the design, it usually breaks the spell, but it can sometimes… twist instead. It is no longer the original spell, but it wasn’t broken quite enough to fail entirely. Almost invariably, these twisted spells are harmful.”

Rory nodded. Ah, yes. He had heard of those, hadn’t he?

Max continued, “It’s why the Council bans the modification of spells, and the punishments are harsh. Most people know the dangers, but every once in a while, you get someone who decides that they’ve cracked the code or they think they’re just smarter than everyone else. Or they see a Spellsmith make an amendment and think that means they can mimic their addition and make their own. That’s just not how it works.”

“Very good,” Mr. Jones said. “Quite right, quite right. What about the last one?”

Max flipped to the third page, and then with a sound that was shockingly loud in the quiet room, he tore the page in half, then again and again.

Rory gaped at him.

“No,” Max said, glaring. “I don’t deal with spells like that.”

He jerked to his feet, strode across the room, and tossed the fragmented pieces into the fire.

Rory was still staring.

Mr. Jones demanded, “I thought you promoted knowledge and the sharing of spells?”

Max whirled on him, his expression angry. “That’s nonsense when it comes to spells that were created only to hurt people. Certain spells are dangerous, and they can be contained appropriately. They should not be shared, but there may be a use for them. But spells like that?” Max’s hand chopped through the air, and his voice was implacable. “There is absolutely *no* reason for those to exist, and preserving them only encourages someone to use them at some point. I’ll have no part in it.”

Mr. Jones, strangely, was smiling. “You’ll do.”

Ah. Another test, apparently.

Max was still glowering. “Do you have a lot of spells like that?”

“I do not believe so,” Mr. Jones said, shrugging a frail shoulder. “Certainly not in what has been identified. But I am neither a Spellsmith nor a Spellreader. Some of the spells I’ve collected over the years have been labeled, and some of them have even been labeled by trusted sources or have been verified. They are marked as such. I did a lot of that when I was younger, but those days are long behind me. I need someone now who can look after the collection and make sure that only the good is preserved.”

Max looked somewhat mollified but still rather grumpy. “Oh.”

Mr. Jones wheezed another laugh. “Yes, Spellreader. It is not a task that can be trusted to just anyone. I was not certain whether it was meant to be you or not. But your pretty friend here has come at the right time.”

Max gave them both a weird look. Rory was really impressed with how aware this old witch was of the world and the Magic. It wasn’t clear *exactly* what he knew, but he seemed to get more of an impression of Rory than anyone else Rory had ever encountered. The fact that mythical shifters existed was something that had been allowed to fade from human, shifter, and witch knowledge. Humans weren’t the only ones who could be terrible, after all.

“You’re good at listening,” Rory told him.

Mr. Jones smiled faintly. “I have been here for a long time, and eventually, patience won out over impatience. I learned that some things can only be done when they are meant to be done.”

Max grumbled, “You believe in fate, too, don’t you?”

Mr. Jones said, “Not exactly. But I suppose I don’t *not* believe in it, either.”

Max made a disgusted noise that made Mr. Jones laugh softly again, breath wheezing. “It is not that this meeting was laid out in the stars or anything like that. It is more that…” He hesitated for a moment, like he was trying to put together the words. “It’s more that sometimes there is something that needs to occur. And whatever force you believe exists helps to make it happen.”

Max squinted at him and then asked pointedly, “Sort of like *fate*?”

Mr. Jones coughed, still looking amused. “Something like it, I suppose. But I don’t think it’s anything so extreme as this moment having been always meant to happen. I think various forces needed to combine. I think we needed someone like you and your friend and someone like me and the knowledge that I possess. If it wasn’t us, I think it would have been

someone else, and maybe it would have been next year or ten years ago or perhaps tomorrow. I think we combined the way we needed to, and so here we are."

Max opened his mouth, closed it again, and then ventured, "That sort of makes sense, actually. And I do like it better than the idea that everything in my life happened to lead me to this point, so thanks for that."

Mr. Jones nodded. "Yes, I think we all prefer to believe we are the makers of our own destinies. I believe it's fundamentally true. None of us are islands, after all. We are all influenced by outside forces. Our families, friends, society. So who is to say if there isn't also a little nudge now and again from something greater than all of that. But we are still making choices, and they will never be purely our own with no other influence. Even if we were raised on a deserted island all on our own, we would be a product of that upbringing, would we not?"

"You're really annoying to talk to," Max said conversationally.

Rory snorted and then clapped a hand to his mouth belatedly to cover it, but Mr. Jones just laughed, and even Peter looked amused.

"Oh, you're not wrong," Peter agreed drolly.

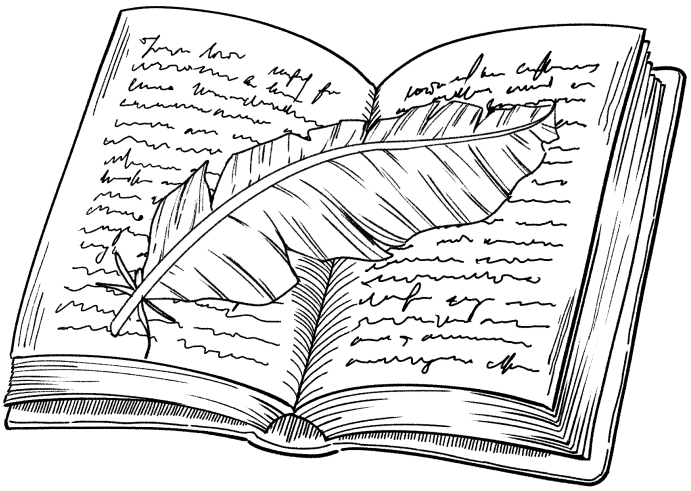
"Eh, when you get as old as me, you say what you mean, and sometimes, people don't like that." Mr. Jones didn't seem bothered.

Max shrugged. "Yeah, I started doing that about two decades ago."

Rory actually thought the two men would get along extremely well once they got past the antagonism and came to respect one another's bluntness. But unfortunately, he doubted there'd be much time for making friends.

"So," Mr. Jones said, pale blue eyes gleaming, "would you like to see the spellbooks?"

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Chapter Eleven

Max

Max had wondered if any of the books were actually in this room. It was huge and ostentatious. If anyone could get away with such a prominent display of magical books, it was someone rich like Mr. Jones, but it still seemed like an unwise choice. What if there was a leak in the library or someone needed to come clean the chimney? Could you always ensure it was a witch or a shifter? Did the books have charms cast on them constantly?

"Yes," Max confirmed, "I would love to see the spellbooks."

He was still kind of annoyed by all the hoops he'd just been made to jump through, but he could respect the man's desire to ensure he'd found a reputable Spellreader. If Max had heard about the man and his collection, then he surely wasn't the only one. Had others tried to take advantage of him over the years? Had they been less scrupulous about what spells they were willing to take or tell people about?

People being the way they were, there was probably someone out there who would pay good money for a spell that would cause unending pain to the person you cast it on, couldn't be ended with the undo charm, and had no counter built into the spell. And that just… no. Max didn't want something like that to exist in the world, as he'd amply demonstrated.

Fortunately, it seemed like Mr. Jones didn't either, and Max thought they were actually going to get along.

Peter wheeled Mr. Jones over to a bookshelf. It was filled with tooled leather volumes that looked old and well-preserved, but they didn't look different than any other shelf in the library.

Only then Mr. Jones reached out and tipped one of the books.

Rory clapped excitedly, his face lit up with child-like glee. "Ooh, is there a secret passage? This is so exciting!"

Once the book was tipped, there was a click, and the whole bookshelf swung in without a sound.

Mr. Jones intoned, "You may come in, Maximilian March. You may come in, Rory Brand."

Max felt the pressure of the wards as he passed, meaning they were *strong*. The room was dim, with only the light filtering in from the exterior library, with the secret door half open, held ajar by Peter.

"I will need to cast," Mr. Jones told them. "Hold on. Peter."

The man produced another spell, this one written out on paper, and handed it over. Max's quick glance at it confirmed that it was for the wards, a way to spell in new people so that they could pass without Mr. Jones.

As the spell instructed, Mr. Jones reached out one shaky hand and clasped Max's.

"Are you certain you want to do this?" Max asked.

Once the man cast this spell, Max could theoretically enter this room whenever he wanted.

The old man smiled a little. "Yes, I'm certain. I wasn't until I met you and the bright one, but I'm certain now."

Max blinked at that way of describing Rory, but… Mr. Jones wasn't wrong. He'd certainly brought a lot of brightness to Max's life.

So Max nodded, and the old man sketched the ward spell, then infused it with his magic. It filled slowly, like he was reaching the end of his reserves of magic. Max didn't know if that was actually a thing, but he wasn't sure he'd ever met anyone as old as Mr. Jones was. He looked like he had to be at least a hundred—and if he looked like that, then he was likely older still. With a familiar, witches could make it to 120 or 130. Was he older even than that?

Max held his tongue. It was only curiosity that made him want to know, and he was more concerned with the books he'd wanted to see since he was a child.

Max's mother had come out once, but she hadn't been allowed into this room. Mr. Jones had needed a second opinion on a spell, and he seemed to have been happy with Max's mother's work, but he'd never invited her to

return. Max's parents had been trying since then to convince him to share the knowledge, but to no avail.

Had he… been waiting for Max and Rory?

It was a wild idea, but… not the weirdest thing Max had ever heard.

Mr. Jones intoned Max's name, and Max felt a shiver go through him as the wards adjusted to accept him. Mr. Jones waited for a few moments and then repeated the spell for Rory.

He looked wan and pale in the dim light, and Max couldn't help but worry about what would happen if he expired right here. Max really wanted to look at all of the spellbooks, but he didn't want anything to happen to this fierce old man who had apparently been waiting for just the right people at just the right moment to allow them to look at his spellbooks.

Once the spell had been cast on Rory, Peter allowed the door to swing closed. There was a moment of complete darkness, and then lights switched on.

Peter pointed. "If you're permitted to pass through the wards, you can get out by pressing the latch here."

Max and Rory both peered at the latch and nodded.

The spell Max had looked at had detailed how to add someone to the wards and not the actual wards themselves. Hopefully, they weren't being lured in here to be killed.

And then Max turned around and saw *the books*.

The room wasn't as big as the library it was attached to. But it wasn't some teeny bolt-hole, either. It was a library in its own right, just on a smaller, more everyday book lover's scale rather than a rich guy who lived in a gigantic house that could have a handful of Max's buildings inside of it and they'd still rattle around.

This room had soft, recessed lighting and floor-to-ceiling shelves on every wall. It was long rather than deep, and they'd come in on one of the ends, so when Max looked to his left, he could see that it stretched on for quite a while.

There were no windows, obviously, and it wasn't as lofty as the library, but it wasn't so cramped that he was in danger of feeling claustrophobic. The ceilings still had to be eight or nine feet tall, though there was only one level. There were several comfortable arm chairs that had been placed to make a little reading nook, and there were a couple of tables and desks, like this really was intended as a place for people to study… just hidden in the wall

because witches hadn’t made it this far without learning a thing or two about hiding.

“This is amazing,” Max breathed.

The books were the sort of array that he’d come to expect, though it did seem to skew a bit towards expensive and older books from the look of them. He’d really expect nothing less from Mr. Jones’s collection.

But he could see sheafs of paper bound in twine, some raw edges, some hand-bound tomes. He even caught a glimpse of a few totally modern-looking books—including a few that looked like they’d been perfect bound as regular paperbacks. Please let that not mean that someone had had an *actual* spellbook print-to-ordered online.

Sometimes, people were such fools.

But the majority of the books were more like those outside of this room, bound in leather or cloth, and probably not bound in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries.

“This is quite a collection,” Max said as he found his voice.

“It’s been in the family for generations.” Mr. Jones sounded proud. “Most of us added to it over the years. There were a couple of generations where we had Spellreaders in the family, and that’s when much of the work was done. In other generations, non-family Spellreaders helped. But there was an… incident”—he glowered—“and it’s been hard to figure out who to trust.”

Because unfortunately, having magic and living longer didn’t necessarily make witches smarter than the average person.

Max explained matter-of-factly, “My goal has always been to make spells safer and more accessible to everyone. And I wouldn’t gatekeep at all except for those asshole Spellsmiths who’ve created awful spells over the years.”

Mr. Jones laughed his creaky laugh, though this made him cough again. Peter produced a snowy white handkerchief for him, and he coughed into it.

Once he’d recovered, he agreed, “Yes, as with so many things, humans are very good at inventing without asking whether they should. And perhaps there are even reasons why a spell was invented that made sense at the time but could be misused. Why don’t you take a look around? All the books have preservation spells on them, so you don’t have to wear gloves.”

Max couldn’t resist the lure of the books with that invitation, and he immediately approached the nearest shelves, pulling a book bound in brown leather out and carefully opening it. The spine creaked slightly, but it did indeed seem to be well cared for, and nothing cracked.

It was a compilation of spells from the Argyle family back in the 1700s. The spells were hand drawn as well as identified by hand, and it looked like that had been done at the same time. Rarely, there were notes added in pencil that amended the original explanation. It looked like in this case, at least, nothing had been hidden deliberately or maliciously; there were simply a few spells that must have been so matter-of-fact to the family that they hadn't included all the nuance.

Max looked at another book and then another. Like the books and compilations that he reviewed at the shop, a number used a cipher and didn't have the correct explanation on the correct page. Several were just plain wrong. In those cases, he would probably never know if the error was deliberate or not. (A Spellsmith could have given them a spell they said did what had been written down, only it didn't do that at all. Or a Spellreader might have lied about what the spell could do.)

The collection had been grouped based on verification; there was a section for fully verified, one for labeled but not confirmed, and one for unverified. Each section was sorted either alphabetically by family or by theme, if there was one. That wasn't the most common type of book, but it was the sort that Max would like to see a lot more of.

Wouldn't it make sense to be able to look up a collection of spells on cooking if that's what you were interested in? Or gardening or mending or training?

But that only worked if spells were actually accessible. Otherwise, it was just one witch hoarding a bunch of spells from everyone else.

With the advent of the internet, surely there were better ways to do this now. Yes, they needed something secure, but they didn't have to be restricted to one handwritten book.

The Spellsmiths might hate Max if he undercut their business, but honestly, if the spell had already been created, why *should* anyone have to ask a Spellsmith to make it again? There were still going to be people who wanted genuinely bespoke work. There would still be new circumstances that sprang up, with nuances no one else had encountered. That was what a Spellsmith should be for.

Otherwise? Spells that existed should be available for everyone.

Max wanted to share them with the world—as soon as he'd gone through to ensure that the spells were correctly identified, the dangerous ones were stored away, and the bad ones were destroyed. And as long as he had a way to stay afloat while providing that service.

His mother had begun this task, and Max wanted to continue her mission. He wanted witches to always be able to find the spells they needed. He admired Mr. Jones's collection, and he understood why it was hidden from normal people—but it really wasn't doing very many people any good from this location.

Max was pretty sure that the rumors had been right, though, and it was one of the biggest private collections of spells that existed. (Although he supposed there could be other witches who weren't even letting rumors out.) This was a fabulous start, though, if Mr. Jones really was willing to let Max do more with it.

Actually, they hadn't clarified any of that, had they? Max was imagining sharing these spells with the world. With this many books that he didn't need to purchase, and with some luck if he could convince Mr. Jones that they needed to invest in infrastructure to make it possible—Rory could do the talking—Max might be able to realize his dream of a library of shared spells. Mr. Jones might not be imagining anything of the sort, though. He might simply be imagining getting Max's help for his own needs.

Much as Max wanted to share the collection, he did accept that these books belonged to Mr. Jones. He wasn't quite so much of an anarchist that he intended to share them without permission. He just… really wanted to get permission.

He looked around… and that was when he realized that he and Rory were alone in the hidden room. Max's situational awareness really was crap when he got lost in spells and books. Mr. Jones and Peter were gone, and Rory was curled up in one of the comfy chairs reading one of the books.

"Where did everyone go?" Max asked.

Rory looked up at him and smiled, closing his book, though he kept a finger in his spot.

"Peter took Mr. Jones off when it became clear you would be absorbed for a while. Honestly, I think that's why Mr. Jones asked for this early meeting, so that you'd still have plenty of time today to examine all the books. There's a snack set out for us in the library, and we're to have an early dinner with Mr. Jones and Peter."

At the mention of food, Max's stomach rumbled hungrily. He looked at his watch. It was almost three.

"What time is dinner?"

"Five thirty," Rory said.

It wasn’t even that long until dinner, but now that Max had heard his stomach, it seemed to have decided to stage a revolt. There was no way he was going to be able to wait more than an hour and a half for food.

The rumble was so loud that Rory laughed and rose to his feet, setting the book carefully aside.

“Come on,” he said with a grin. “Snacks are this way. Mr. Jones prefers no food in here, which I assume you won’t argue with.”

Max definitely wouldn’t. The preservation spells should help ensure that no damage came to the books, but there was no point in taking silly risks.

“The latch apparently doesn’t open if there’s someone out there who’s not part of the ward spell,” Rory explained as they got to the door. “It can be overridden by pressing it three times, but it’s meant to help reduce the chance that any normal people catch sight of the room—though really, I don’t think anyone would be surprised that a library like this has a secret room.”

No, probably not. But it was still good to take precautions.

In this case, the door pulled open easily, and they were able to pass into the main library and gobble down some tea sandwiches, fresh fruit, and cookies.

“I can see why Mr. Jones likes having a personal cook,” Max admitted.

Rory was grinning again. “I checked again when Mrs. Finch delivered the snacks if she’d like to come work for us, but she just laughed.”

Max assumed that she was well paid, and she seemed happy enough, not that Max had had an in-depth conversation with her or anything.

“We’re managing very well with the changes you’ve implemented,” Max pointed out with a smile. “The cookies and coffee were inspired.”

Rory looked very pleased. “I’m glad you think so. I want everything to go right with the shop.”

Honestly, Rory seemed as invested as Max was.

And then the realization hit him, and he jolted straighter in his chair. “The bookshop!”

“Relax,” Rory soothed, smiling reassuringly at him. “Alex and I have been texting. Everything’s going totally fine, and they’re not worried about anything. I told them to text or call me if anything came up.”

Max hadn’t even heard his phone beep. “Oh. Uh, thank you.”

Rory’s smile was soft. “Of course.”

Max had never met someone who anticipated his needs quite as well as Rory did. Nothing seemed to faze the man, and it made Max feel more comfortable than he could ever have imagined. He didn’t feel guilty or defensive of his interests, and as a result, he voluntarily spent a lot more time

with Rory. Why had there been no people other than his family like this in his life before now?

Or was it because he wasn't supposed to find it until Rory? He still wasn't sure about this whole fate thing.

Once they'd polished off the tray, they went back into the hidden room, and Max went back to his perusal of the shelves, trying to get a better idea of what was in there. Rory settled down with his book, not bothered by Max's preoccupation.

Max was more aware of the other man this time, though. "Come take a look at this."

Rory jumped to his feet and came over to look.

Max pointed. "This whole section of the book is labeled 'spells for your enemy,' and I don't know who did it or when, but someone has gone in and made modifications that break the spells. I can't even tell where the damage is. Maybe they were copied wrong from the very beginning? But none of them are working spells."

Rory smiled. "See? You're not the only one trying to make sure that witches use spells responsibly."

Max was glad of that. There was only one of him, and he appreciated very much any help he could get, even if it was from years or decades before. (In fact, that meant more years where the spells couldn't have been used by anyone, which was awesome.)

But Max was beginning to think that Spellsmiths hadn't been punished severely enough for inventing some really awful spells.

On the other hand, when your entire society was structured around one small group of people being able to make spells, there was probably a point at which they could kind effectively hold everyone else hostage if they wanted to. The witch society depended on them—if not quite utterly, certainly for anything new that needed to be invented.

Max was trying to lay the groundwork for less dependence. They were a long way from that at the moment, but the more collections Max had access to, the more spells he could catalogue. He doubted any one Spellreader could read all the spells that existed in the world, but as long as repositories weren't lost, all that knowledge could accumulate and pass down.

Max was continuing his mother's work, after all.

It seemed like no time at all before Rory was reminding him that they had dinner at 5:30. A look at his watch showed him that it was already after five.

Max was quite certain he could spend the next few years in here and not run out of spells.

But that wasn't on the cards right now. Thanks to cleaning spells, the room had been spotless, but after spending hours in there, Max still felt like he should stretch, splash some water on his face, and wash his hands before he headed into dinner.

He also texted Alex himself. They assured him that everything was totally fine and Max didn't need to worry.

MAX

Okay. We're going in to dinner, but if there's any issues at all, you call us. You've never closed before.

ALEX

And it's so difficult to make sure the store is empty, flip a sign, and lock the door.

MAX

Smartass.

ALEX

[laughing emoji]

MAX

Just… if you need anything.

ALEX

It'll be fine, I promise. But yes, if anything goes sideways, I'll call.

And I'll text when everything is closed up, so you don't need to panic.

Stop worrying.

Max would… try.

Thankfully, there was a staff person stationed outside the library who could conduct them back to their room, wait the few minutes for them to get ready, and then lead them down to the dining room. Max wondered if you ever really got used to living in a place this size, or if there were always parts of it that remained a complete mystery.

He couldn't actually imagine living somewhere this big. It seemed so unnecessary—although he could admit that his one-bedroom apartment felt a little bit small now that he and Rory were staying in it together.

He could definitely see why his mother had moved out of it when she'd met his father. They'd had a little house that was a twenty-minute walk away, and Max had kept it until Evie moved to California.

She stayed in a hotel when she came to visit him, agreeing that it would have been silly to keep the house for those rare visits.

It was the house they'd grown up in, and it had been perfectly acceptable, but they'd spent most of their time at the bookshop. When Max thought of his childhood, that was the place that always sprang to mind. He'd have a lot more of an issue with losing the bookshop than the house.

In this massive house, the dining room they were led to was… not as big as Max had imagined, which probably meant that there was more than one. The table looked like it seated twelve. They'd been arranged at one end of the table, with Mr. Jones at the head. Peter was seated on one side, Rory was on the other, and Max was next to him.

The food was placed on the sideboard because they were apparently going to "feed themselves," which Max took to mean that they needed some privacy for discussions.

"I trust you don't mind," Mr. Jones said in the tone of voice that meant the decision had already been made.

Max sort of wanted to argue on principle, but probably fortunately, Rory spoke first.

"We usually eat sandwiches and takeout," Rory told him, grinning. "We're not going to complain about anything your cook makes."

Max thought he'd been doing slightly better with food than that, but then Rory winked at him as Mr. Jones laughed softly, and Max subsided.

He *did* still like to eat sandwiches and cereal.

Peter got food for Mr. Jones and himself, and Rory and Max served themselves. Rory appeared to have decided to try a little bit of everything, and on balance, Max thought that wasn't a bad plan, so he did the same. There was some sort of fish in a creamy sauce, a tomato-based pasta dish,

grilled chicken, steamed mixed vegetables, mashed potatoes, cheese sauce *and* gravy, and three different kinds of salad.

Max was pretty sure he and Rory could eat for at least a week, maybe more.

They made no attempt to talk for several minutes as they ate, apart from Rory exclaiming happily over all the food, which made Mr. Jones smile faintly.

Finally, the old man pushed his plate away—he'd managed about half of it—and spoke. "So, what do you think of the collection?"

"I think it's fantastic," Max said honestly. "The best private collection I've ever seen."

"But?" Mr. Jones prompted.

Max had actually been trying to be polite for once, but if the man asked? "I think it's a shame that it's not available to the public."

Mr. Jones huffed a noise. "Think I'm hoarding, do you?"

Max shrugged. "Almost all of the witch families did. I think we're past that now, or we should be. We've got more connectivity than ever, and we're terrible at using it. I know there are dangers, and we still need to be careful. But we have reliable means of duplicating spells. We have witches who spring up from seemingly non-magical families. We have an easier time finding out about possibilities, which means a witch who cares about gardening might be in a family of witches who specialize in healing."

Grimacing, Max said, "Honestly, I think what we're doing more than anything right now is enabling the Spellsmiths. Why shouldn't we all use the spells that exist and only get help for truly new or nuanced problems? Your collection, mine, and those around the world show just how much of this knowledge has been collected, but the problem is that it's stopping there. Some people know to come to me, but that's still being filtered through me, and it takes time."

Max was warming to his topic. "I think all these spells should be correctly identified by a Spellreader. The dangerous ones should be locked up, and the terrible ones should be destroyed. And then I think someone should make a damn catalogue so that witches around the world can look them up and learn whatever spell they want. There's so much we could do."

Mr. Jones was silent for a long moment, and then he nodded. "Yes, you'll do. I'm old now, too old to do any of that myself, but you've reassured me that I found the right people for the job. When I'm gone, I'm going to leave the library to you."

Max straightened abruptly. “Wait, what?”

Mr. Jones nodded, looking rather serene for a crotchety old man. “Yes, to you and your friend. I would like you to take care of it, to do all of what you’ve just said. I collected spells for years, rescued some that were going to be used by unscrupulous witches or thrown out by people who didn’t understand. I’d like something more durable that will serve people for the decades and centuries to come.”

Max blinked at him. He’d gotten all fired up about his plan, but he hadn’t expected Mr. Jones to be convinced. In his experience, people like Mr. Jones were more likely to want to preserve the status quo and hoard their wealth and knowledge.

The man had said that it was going to be upon his death, sure… but everyone in the room knew that couldn’t be that far away. Might it have been better if Mr. Jones had done this himself decades ago? Sure. But that wasn’t where they were now. And the man could have easily passed all these spellbooks on to someone else who would keep them all private, like a family member or a collector.

Instead, Mr. Jones was trying to do the right thing now.

“That’s very generous of you,” Max said, realizing he hadn’t responded and everyone was looking at him. “I’d be happy to add your spellbooks to my collection and work to make them more accessible to everyone.”

In a perfect world, Max wouldn’t charge anyone for spells. His current method was a sliding scale based on the client, their actual need and urgency, and how annoying they were.

“You know,” Mr. Jones observed, “I’ve always wondered why more people weren’t Spellreaders. Spellsmiths, I can kind of understand. We run amok as it is, and if more people could create spells with nothing more than a thought, perhaps we would be in an even worse place than we are now. But Spellreaders have a different gift.”

“I don’t know why there aren’t more,” Max admitted.

Like with Spellsmiths, the Spellreader ability often went in families, although no family had been pretentious enough to name themselves “Spellreader” or treat themselves the same way the Spellsmiths did. And family heritage was no guarantee. Max’s grandparents hadn’t been Spellreaders; it had skipped from his great-grandfather to his mother. Evie wasn’t a Spellreader. Max wasn’t likely to have children. Thankfully, there were multiple families, and Max had to believe that the ability would just keep reappearing.

Spellswells, the third unique type of witch, were even more rare—or at least more hidden. They had the ability to magnify existing spells so that they had a much larger or stronger effect. They tended to be badly misused by those in power. Spellsmiths could get themselves out of almost any predicament, and Spellreaders held a certain amount of power because they could read what others could not. What Spellswells could do was amazing—and nefarious witches treated them like personal batteries. Max would never blame them for hiding.

It was Rory who said, “The Magic works in mysterious ways. Spellreaders usually help to keep the Spellsmiths in check. They verify their work, and they do exactly what Max is trying to do, preserving and confirming existing spells. We’ve got better ways of replicating spells now, and people are better able to travel and could come to a repository of spellbooks. Maybe this is all happening exactly when it should. Maybe more Spellreaders and fewer Spellsmiths will be born in the coming years. Or maybe it’s all random chance.”

Max still wasn’t saying he believed in fate, but… there did seem to be an argument that things were happening at the right time.

Mr. Jones pointed at Rory with a trembling index finger. “You don’t believe it’s all chance.”

Rory smiled infectiously. “Well, perhaps not. But I don’t know everything. I could be wrong.”

Mr. Jones didn’t look convinced, and he gave a little huff, but he didn’t argue with Rory, just announced that it was time for dessert.

Rory went back to the sideboard with obvious glee, face lighting up at each new offering. There were two different pies—pecan and blueberry—little lemon tarts, apple crisp, cheesecake squares, and a mound of fresh berries. Plus, there was whipped cream and vanilla ice cream.

Max trusted that this was pulling out all the stops for company, or it would be a lot of wasted food with Mr. Jones. Peter had served Mr. Jones a small scoop of vanilla ice cream with a tiny portion of apple crisp. Rory’s and Max’s plates looked overflowing by comparison.

Rory made rapturous noises as he tried each new dessert.

As Max ate, he pointed out, “I don’t have somewhere as secure as you do to store all the books.”

Mr. Jones waved Max’s objection aside, and it was Peter who said, “You can come and study them here, at least until you get them all sorted.”

“The new owner won’t mind?” Max wanted to know.

Rory almost choked on the mouthful of blueberry pie that he'd been eating, and Max realized belatedly that hadn't been very diplomatic.

"No, they won't mind," Mr. Jones wheezed. "You will come here, and the books can remain where it's safe."

Rory was making happy noises again, but Max was pretty sure it was more about the food than this agreement.

Max nodded. He didn't love getting orders, but apart from the fact he had no idea when he'd find the time to get out here, it made a lot of sense to keep the books in a protected location. Max's back room was quite well protected, but it was a fraction of the space of Mr. Jones's hidden library. So, effectively, he didn't have a location for all these spells.

When Rory had finally eaten his fill—his capacity to eat quite so much sugar was impressive—Mr. Jones spoke again.

"There's something I need you to see now. It's in the library."

Max had to admit that everything Mr. Jones had shown them so far was pretty amazing, and he was definitely ready to see the books once more.

Peter wheeled Mr. Jones back to the library, and Max realized that the man's familiar had been snoozing in his lap all through dinner. She seemed very contentedly curled up, to be honest.

Max managed to discreetly look at his phone on the way, as it had buzzed several times during dinner.

ALEX

Everything closed up and locked.

No armed robbers.

Shop still standing.

Nōwē will probably forgive you in the next century.

And I'll be in tomorrow morning to feed her again.

Max hearted the messages and sent back a quick thank you. They could debrief more thoroughly on Monday.

In the library, they passed back into the secret room, and Peter brought Mr. Jones all the way to the other end of the room, where he leaned over another

bookshelf for a moment until there was a barely audible “click” and part of the shelf swung out.

(When Max came back, he was going to very carefully investigate *every inch* of the place.)

Peter carefully picked up the kitty, who meowed a protest.

Rory rushed forward. “Oh, let me.”

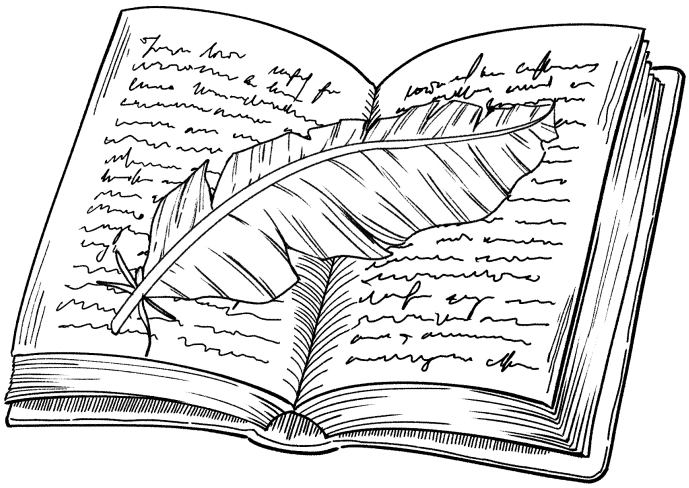
Peter paused, but Mr. Jones waved his hand, so the cat was carefully handed over to Rory.

He cradled her against his chest and murmured, “Oh, who’s the sweetest kitty in the world. Is it you? I think it is.” The cat meowed. Rory laughed and corrected himself, “Sweetest, most *lethal* kitty in the world. But you’ve definitely earned your time to rest, sweet thing. You’ve done such a good job supporting your witch for so long.”

She started to purr, so loudly that Max could hear it across the room. Peter looked surprised, but Max and Mr. Jones just accepted this as one of Rory’s gifts. He could charm everyone.

Mr. Jones said, “The legal matters will all be taken care of, but you know how lawyers and bureaucracy are. I would like to give you this now, so that you will be able to take possession of it immediately.” He stared up at Max fiercely. “But you must promise not to open it until I’m gone. Do you agree?”

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Chapter Twelve

Rory

Max looked like he had *so many questions*, but after regarding Mr. Jones for a long moment, he said simply, “Yes, I agree.”

It was impossible to know exactly what they were agreeing to. Now that Mr. Jones’s lap wasn’t full of his familiar anymore, Peter drew what looked like a box well-wrapped in cloth out of the secret compartment. It had been securely tied with cord and was about a foot square. Were multiple books inside?

Peter set the box carefully down on Mr. Jones’s lap.

Mr. Jones turned to look at Rory with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh, I agree, too,” Rory assured him.

Books fell under Max’s domain more than his, and he’d honestly considered their word collectively given when Max had agreed, but he could see why Mr. Jones probably wanted explicit consent.

“Good, good.” Mr. Jones nodded. “You must keep it safe at all costs. Will you?”

At the same time, they both agreed, “I will.”

“It’s yours, then,” Mr. Jones declared, sounding tired. “Leave it here for now if you wish. You can open and close the compartment now. It’s the most secure spot in the house. You’ll know when to look at it. You must take care of it.”

“Of course,” Max agreed. “Taking care of books and spells is something of a specialty of mine.”

Mr. Jones nodded faintly. “Yes, I suppose it is. Take it.”

Max leaned down and carefully lifted the wrapped bundle off of Mr. Jones’s lap.

The fierce kitty’s meowing got louder; she wanted to sit with her witch again now that his lap was available.

Rory pressed a kiss to the top of her head and then leaned closer so that he could gently lay her down in Mr. Jones’s lap.

“Such a good kitty,” he whispered. “Not too much longer now.”

When he looked up, Mr. Jones’s eyes were gazing at him intently. “No?”

“No,” Rory confirmed gently. “But I think you knew that.”

It certainly didn’t take anyone with Rory’s abilities to know that Mr. Jones was not long for this world.

Mr. Jones shrugged. “Well, perhaps I did.” He reached out a hand, and Rory took it. “You took a long time to get here.”

Rory’s smile was rueful. “I go where the Magic directs, but its instructions are often not very clear.”

Wheezing a laugh, Mr. Jones conceded, “No, I don’t suppose they are. Thank you for coming.” He widened the words, looking at Max now, too. “Both of you.”

Max said, “I’m very glad to be here. You have a fantastic collection, and I’d love to get it better catalogued and available for more people.”

“Perhaps you can manage it,” Mr. Jones conceded. “The world has changed in many ways, and perhaps it’s not all bad. Maybe we won’t make all of the same mistakes.”

“People and the world are evolving,” Rory pointed out. “They do adapt, over time. Sometimes they lapse, too, but if we never try, we’ll never succeed.”

Mr. Jones nodded, but all he said was, “I will retire for the night. I may not see you tomorrow. You can look at the books again in the morning, if you wish. You’ll leave after lunch.”

“Thank you,” Max said, sounding surprisingly earnest and very not grumpy. “I appreciate it. Is it alright if I look a little longer tonight, as well?”

Mr. Jones waved his hand dismissively. “Yes, that’s fine. Peter.”

The secretary stepped forward and smoothly wheeled Mr. Jones back out of the room.

Max looked down at the box he was holding. “I am *so* curious, but since we’re not allowed to look yet, I just want to put it away again.”

Rory nodded, but when Max looked over at him, he realized a real response was required. How nice of Max to really be treating this like it was partly Rory’s.

“I agree,” Rory told him. “If it’s been safe in that hidden area for however long Mr. Jones has had it, then I think we should put it back there. We’ll be able to find out what it is soon enough.”

Max nodded and bent over to look at the secret area. He closed the shelf and made sure he could open it again before he tucked the box back inside and shut the shelf once more. Then he tugged it open, looked at the box, and closed it again.

When he saw Rory looking, he shrugged. “I still have no idea what’s going on.”

That was fair. Rory didn’t really know what was going on, either. But this had definitely been very important to Mr. Jones. In fact, if Rory didn’t miss his guess, it was the very reason that Mr. Jones had held out as long as he had. Rory still wasn’t sure what made the man think that Max and Rory were the right people. (They were both great people, of course, but they also had no idea what was going on. Rory might believe in the Magic and something like fate, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t frustrating sometimes.)

With the box carefully sealed away, Max looked around himself like he couldn’t quite figure out where to start.

“Do you just want to read something?” Rory asked. “For fun?”

Realistically, it wasn’t like he could make much headway in cataloguing anything tonight, and they were about to leave for days or weeks. Rory didn’t think Mr. Jones would rearrange anything, but it wasn’t out of the question.

Max’s eyes traveled around the room. “Would you mind?”

“Of course not,” Rory demurred immediately.

Max flashed him a smile. “For a little while, then. In the morning, I think we could get a preliminary count of the books and their organization. I’ll have to check everything properly later, but that would be a good start.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Rory agreed.

Within a few minutes, Max was lost completely in the books surrounding them. They spent almost three hours in the little room, Rory alternating between reading his completely prosaic book—okay, it was a steamy fantasy romance, but it wasn't *literally* magical—and watching Max. Max was in his element, and it was delightful the way his face lit up as he looked at one book or another. He browsed for a while, looking at this book and then that collection of spells, not seeming able to commit to one specific text when there were so many options. But then he'd lean against a shelf and get lost in something for twenty or thirty minutes before he pulled himself out of it and went on to look at something else.

Really, he was adorable.

It was edging towards eleven by the time Max yawned for the dozenth or so time, seemed annoyed with himself, checked his watch, and then appeared surprised by the time.

"Oh," he said, a bit blankly. "Is it that time already?"

He'd turned off his usual alarms for this trip, and it showed.

"Time flies when you're having fun," Rory quipped.

Max grinned at him. "That's true. But we need to be up early to get counting; I don't want to wear out our welcome."

Really, it was just as well that they'd been given a reasonable deadline. Without it, they'd probably be leaving at this time tomorrow night, which wouldn't make for pleasant driving or a pleasant opening on Monday.

They might need to talk to Alex about taking over Saturdays more often, if they were up for it. Would Max consider keeping Sundays closed more permanently if it meant he could be here looking at all these books?

Or Rory supposed that he could stay at the bookshop and keep it open on Sundays. He grimaced faintly. He loved the bookshop, and he'd do it for Max… but he would much rather spend time with his witch.

They needed a member of staff to escort them again, and Rory hoped they hadn't had to stay up just for them. It was too late now, anyway. They both thanked the man, and then they got ready for bed. Max, still looking a bit embarrassed, but not as bad as yesterday said, "Would you mind?"

"Not at all," Rory assured him. "Just let me know if it gets uncomfortable at any point."

He enjoyed sleeping in his bird form; he always had. But he liked sleeping as a human, too, and he liked being close to Max.

Rory chose to set his book aside right away tonight. He'd read for several hours already, and he was tired. Being so close to Mr. Jones and his familiar wasn't draining, exactly, but it took its toll, seeing the two of them on the cusp of death like that.

Death was a perfectly natural part of life, of course. There would be all sorts of problems if everyone lived forever. Mr. Jones and his familiar seemed ready, overall, which would make things easier, but still…

"Everything alright?" Max asked, voice quiet in the dark of the room.

Rory hummed an agreement. "Yeah. Just thinking about Mr. Jones and his familiar. They've been alive for a long time, but now that time is drawing to a close. Transitions tend to be hard, you know?"

Max let out a puff of breath. "Yeah, I know. I guess no one lives forever, right?"

"Right," Rory agreed.

In truth, they weren't sure about the mythical shifters. Having been created by the Magic, they assumed it could unmake them, too, but they had no idea if that would happen. They lived their lives differently than mortals did. The others had said they didn't exactly choose how long they wanted to sleep, but the hibernation seemed to loosely correlate to how much of a break they needed, like the Magic was guiding them and giving them the pause they required. Rory's rebirths took care of that, one more way that he was different even from the other mythical shifters.

Rory was a fan of all the different experiences. He enjoyed protecting people. And he'd always been looking for his mate. But he knew it wasn't the same for everyone. They might all be mythical, but they hadn't all had the same experiences. A few of them had found their mates centuries ago. Imagine how different it would be to spend hundreds of years with your mate!

That was definitely a future Rory was hoping for.

"Imagine how insufferable Mr. Jones would be if that were the case," Max grumbled, pulling Rory back to the present and making him laugh.

"I don't think he'd enjoy it that much," Rory pointed out mildly.

Not at this point in his life, at least. He was old and tired and ready to lay down his burden. Mortals weren't built for that much time. For those who became mates of mythical shifters, they took on some of those shifter characteristics, at least when it came to hibernating with them. Rory didn't

know if that meant Max would burn with him, or if maybe he'd hibernate when Rory was reborn?

Oh, he wished he had someone he could ask about this!

"I suppose not," Max conceded. "Perhaps he's past that now. Thanks for coming with me, by the way. I don't think I could have done this on my own."

"Of course you could have," Rory said with perfect faith.

Max's lip curled. "We would have insulted one another a lot more."

With a grin, Rory conceded, "Well, that's probably true." If Rory was right, then Mr. Jones had somehow been waiting for both of them. "I'm really glad I was here, too. It's been fun."

He could hear Max's grin, even if he couldn't see it in the darkened room. "Yeah, it has." He yawned. "Goodnight, Rory."

"Goodnight, Max."

It didn't take too much longer for Max's breathing to even out, and Rory followed him into sleep.



Sunday morning was pretty much a repeat of Saturday, with the knowledge that their time was drawing to a close. (Also, Rory was certain he would be willing to wake up like this for the rest of his life. He wouldn't mind adding in cuddles, if Max ever became comfortable with that, but just waking up next to the man was awesome.) Max had set the alarm for six so that they could be in the kitchen for six-thirty and the very beginning of breakfast. That way, they could get to the library as quickly as possible.

Rory restrained himself to two helpings, though he couldn't help his lavish praise for all the food and another one of the pumpkin spice steamers. Max inhaled coffee, shoveled down breakfast, and was practically dancing in his pants to get to his beloved books.

In the secret room, Rory allowed himself to be directed however Max wanted, and they spent the whole morning making notes in their phones about the quantity of books and bundles of paper in each section. Where possible, Rory noted the type of book, but it wasn't an exact science. He also texted back and forth with Alex a few times. They confirmed that Nōwē was alive, fed, and had deigned to play with them a little.

When Max's alarm went off for lunch, he looked both sad but also pretty well satisfied.

"Good morning's work?" Rory asked.

Max nodded with a small smile. "Yes. I'd love to get this into some sort of digital archive where it could all be identified by length and origin and spells, but that's a pipe dream at the moment. This is still an excellent start, and I have a better idea now of what I want to begin when we come back."

Rory liked that *we* very much.

They made sure the room looked the same as it had before they'd entered, and then they slipped out and closed the door carefully behind them. Max sighed.

"We'll be back," Rory reminded him.

Max nodded, straightening his shoulders and standing taller. "Yes, we will."

He sounded like he mostly believed it. Rory was sure that Mr. Jones had meant what he said, but if there were legal hoops that needed to be leaped through, it might take a while to sort out. Despite the fact that humans lived very short lives, they'd come up with a lot of ways for things to take a very long time.

They were funny like that.

A staff member appeared to take them to lunch, so they didn't even need to try to find their way, and they were treated to one more delicious meal.

Peter appeared soon after they started eating. "May I join you?"

Rory gestured him to a seat, and he served himself.

"Is Mr. Jones alright?" Rory asked.

Nodding, though his expression was a bit grave, Peter said, "As right as can be expected under the circumstances. He's very glad to have met you at last, but he's exhausted. He will need some time to rest and recover."

Rory didn't think there would be a lot of recovery at this point, but he didn't say that. Instead, he thanked the man. "We appreciate his hospitality and generosity."

Max nodded. “Yeah, I didn’t think I was ever going to get to see the collection, never mind get to work on actually cataloguing it properly. I’m looking forward to it.”

Peter smiled faintly. “Yes, I can see that you are. I think you’ll be a good fit for the work.”

Rory was certain Max would be *perfect* for the work—but perhaps he was a little bit biased.

Because Mrs. Finch was amazing, she even made coffee and a steamer for the two of them for the road *and* fresh-baked cookies. (Snickerdoodles and pumpkin whoopie pies.)

“You’re *certain* you don’t want to work at a bookshop?” Rory asked one last time. “I’m sure our customers would be very happy about it.”

She laughed again. “Stop trying to steal me away, you scamp.”

Rory wasn’t sure he’d ever been a scamp before. He preened.

“You’ll just have to come visit again, won’t you?” she suggested.

They both nodded. Between the books and the food, there was really no reason not to try to visit as often as possible.

They just had to figure out the bookshop hours.

Thankfully, it didn’t take very long to pack their belongings, and they were soon back in the car and driving away. Now that it was daytime, Rory could appreciate the splendor of the grounds. The tunnel of trees that had been only a dark blur when they arrived was a riot of autumnal colors arching over their heads: reds, oranges, yellows, and browns. Rory’s favorites!

“It’s beautiful,” he breathed.

“It’s expensive,” Max pointed out dryly.

Rory laughed. “I meant the trees more than the house, but yes, it’s definitely expensive.”

He still wasn’t sure why anyone needed a house that big.

“Ready to go back to a one-bedroom apartment?” Max asked.

“And a *bookshop*,” Rory said with emphasis.

Max huffed out a laugh, but he sounded happy as he said, “Yeah, and a bookshop.”

The drive back was peaceful in a way that the drive up hadn’t been. Max seemed more comfortable at the wheel now, which might have been because they were driving during the day or perhaps because he knew where he stood now.

“Good visit?” Rory asked.

Max laughed. “Yes. Super weird, but really good. Thanks again for making it happen.”

Rory shrugged. “I don’t really think it was me.”

Max shook his head stubbornly. “You don’t know how many times I talked to that man or his secretary and tried to get him to let me come see his collection. It never worked. The only thing that changed is you.”

Rory thought this was more of a Magic thing than a Rory thing… but maybe Mr. Jones had seen the Magic through Rory, or Rory through the Magic.

“Well, if I helped, I’m glad,” Rory conceded. “It was nice to meet everyone, and it does seem like the collection was pretty awesome?”

He let this trail off into a question, because he wasn’t a Spellreader.

“Yeah, it really was,” Max confirmed. “I mean, my family’s collected a fair bit over the years, too, but this was so many books, and they’re all new to me. Mr. Jones clearly has a lot of resources.”

“Plus there was a secret room!” Rory pointed out with glee.

Max laughed a warm, happy sound. “Yes, that was fun. I kind of want to change our back room into a secret room, but… it would be the world’s worst-kept secret.”

Rory smiled and agreed, “Unless you want to hand off the management of the store completely, I think your current set-up makes a lot more sense.”

Max was silent for a moment before he admitted, “You know, I don’t even know what I want. I always complain about the customers, and I don’t really like them, but I assumed it was something I just had to put up with. What would it be like if I really didn’t have to deal with any of them and could just do research all the time?” His hands tightened and loosened on the steering wheel. “It’s hard to imagine, to be honest. And I have no idea how we’re going to get up to Mr. Jones’s to do all this research.”

“We’ll talk to Alex,” Rory said calmly. “We’ll see how they feel about it.”

“They’re fifteen,” Max pointed out.

“They won’t be fifteen forever,” Rory countered, since that wasn’t how humans worked.

Max huffed a breath and conceded, “Well, that’s true.”

“When’s their birthday?” Rory asked.

Max frowned as he stared ahead of him, eyes on the road. “You know, I have no idea. I mean, I must have written it down several times on all those

blasted forms when I hired them, but once I worked out they were fifteen, I just plugged the number in and didn't think any more about it."

Rory patted his arm. That sounded like Max. Rory would have checked for when to plan the surprise party.

"We'll just ask them once we're back." Rory was silent for a moment, and then offered, "And if you wanted to head up here on your own, I could always stay and manage the store."

Max's gaze actually strayed from the road for a fleeting moment, looking at Rory's face before snapping back forward. "You don't want to come with me?"

He sounded… unhappy?

"Of course I want to come with you!" Rory exclaimed, a bit too loud. "This was awesome." He cleared his throat. "But it did occur to me that I wasn't exactly useful. So if I could be of more use at the shop, I could definitely do that."

Rory had a lot to thank the man for, after all.

Max was silent for a moment, and then he said firmly, "We'll talk to Alex. This doesn't have to be resolved instantly. If things are going well, I could probably even hire someone else, like a weekend supervisor or something. Besides, Mr. Jones might not want us to descend on him every weekend. I think it'll take a little time to come up with a schedule that makes sense—and you are definitely coming with me if you want to."

Rory couldn't help but beam at him, delighted by that certainty. "I want to. Very much."

"Good," Max said, nodding definitively. "That's settled, then."

He sipped at his coffee and let out a happy noise.

Rory felt himself melt a little. His grumpy mate was really the sweetest man in existence, as long as you weren't a jerk, and Rory *definitely* wanted to keep him. But he wasn't sure that Max had an interest in being kept—or getting Rory in return. Although the fact that he wanted Rory to come with him was definitely a good sign. Rory was going to take it as a positive, and he'd try not to get ahead of himself or get greedy.

He needed to be patient. And Max was definitely worth it! It was just that Rory wanted him so very much. But he *was* going to be sensible about this. He'd been hoping for his mate for centuries. Of course Max, who wasn't even sure he believed in fated mates, was doubtful and less open about the whole thing.

Besides, Max *did* wanted Rory to be with him, which was wonderful. Rory still didn't know how this was going to end—but he'd leave that up to Max.

"Why don't you find us some music to listen to," Max suggested. "I have a streaming service on my phone."

Rory switched out of the map app, then scrolled through various music options, trying to decide what the best thing to listen to would be. Rory's tastes were varied, and he finally picked based on the playlist name.

Max laughed when Rory told him, "It's called crisp autumnal leaves in shades of orange and soft rain and you have an umbrella."

"Is this your favorite season?" Max asked.

Rory shrugged. "I love the colors so much, but I love the heat of summer." He considered this for a moment. "I also like all the life bursting in spring. And I like how everything's sleeping in the winter and yet it can be so bright and crisp with the snow."

Max snorted. "So you just love everything?"

Rory grinned at him. "Yeah. I mean, there are things I don't like as much about them, too, but it's better to dwell on the positive, right?"

Max nodded slowly, a contemplative expression on his face. "I get the idea that's how you approach most things."

"You're not wrong," Rory conceded. "I mean, I can't control everything. Sometimes, bad things happen. Sometimes, I have to start over somewhere new when I'm not ready to let the old things go. But the old things are gone just the same. Rather than dwelling on all the things that I miss, I try to focus on all the good things instead. If I were always looking back, I'd miss what was right in front of me."

Rory had so much past that he could look back on, and while there were many beautiful moments, there were terrible moments, too.

Max nodded. "I know what you mean. I don't think you and I approach things the same way, exactly, but looking forward and focusing on Evie and the store was the only way I got through my parents' death. If all I'd done is thought about how they'd been taken away from us too soon and it wasn't fair, I might have been nothing but angry." He shrugged. "It was a terrible accident, and it was no one's fault. I had to learn to let that go so that it didn't poison everything moving forward."

"That's smart," Rory told him.

"That's *therapy*," Max countered, though his lips had quirked up.

“I’m glad you were able to get help,” Rory told him earnestly. The mythical shifters could perhaps have benefited from a therapist over the years, though they seemed to have mostly managed. “Life has taught me that the world is so vibrant because there’s so much change. We lose people, which is often terrible and sad, but new people are also born or come into our lives right when we need them. Our experiences shape and change us. We’re not static. And that’s terrible and wonderful.”

“Yes, that’s true.” Max sighed. “I think I don’t like the idea of fate because then I can’t help but ask if that means that my parents were *fated* to die like that. And if so, why? For no reason? So that Evie and I would learn what it was like to be orphans? I don’t like anything about that.”

Rory made a face. “Oh, no, I can see how that would be hard to handle.” He thought about it for another minute. “This is all my personal opinion, but I don’t think it’s as simple as that. I don’t think people balance off one another in some sort of eternal ledger like that. We live in a flawed, imperfect world, and I think sometimes good things come out of terrible things. Sometimes, bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people, and it can all be very frustrating. I think that actually argues for the existence of free will.”

“But you also believe that we’re mates,” Max pointed out.

Rory nodded. “I believe that we’re highly compatible and that we could choose to be together, if we wanted to be. And yes, I believe that I was nudged here so that I could meet you and that connection could be given the chance to form—if we both want it. But we’re not compelled to choose one another. You get to decide what you want.”

“*We* get to decide,” Max argued.

“We,” Rory amended. Only he’d made his decision about the man pretty much the moment he’d met him. He continued, “You know I think there are… magical nudges. But I don’t know if everyone gets them but most aren’t attuned enough to hear it. Or maybe it’s not everyone for some reason. Or is it possible what I think of as a nudge from the Magic is just my intuition picking up something that most people miss? I suppose so. In any case, I don’t think there’s one big power calling the shots.”

“You don’t believe in a god?” Max asked.

Rory shook his head. “Not as such. I do believe in the Magic, but I don’t think it has a god-like sentience. I think it’s kind of unknowable, which I

guess some people consider their gods. But I don't think it's either all-powerful or all-knowing."

Curiously, Max asked, "Do you believe that if you prayed to the Magic, it would hear your prayers and grant them?"

Rory shrugged. "I don't think so. I mean, I do believe it's brought me to my mate, which is something I've wished for endlessly—but it took a long time. Would you see that as it fulfilling my prayer or wish?"

Max huffed. "Hmm. Yeah, even if you're right about this whole mate thing, how would you ever prove if it happened because of something specific? You could argue that what seemed like way too long for us was a perfectly reasonable timeframe for some unknowable power."

"Exactly," Rory agreed.

He *did* believe in the Magic, but it had always felt to him like things had come together when they were supposed to. Max couldn't be his mate before Max existed, now could he? Had there been other possibilities over the centuries? Chances that Rory had missed for other possible mates? Maybe. But now he couldn't imagine anyone other than the man before him. But that still didn't mean Rory had figured this out correctly.

"Maybe this is all coincidence," Rory admitted. "Maybe some higher being gave me a nudge. No matter how it happened, I'm here, and I'm happy about that."

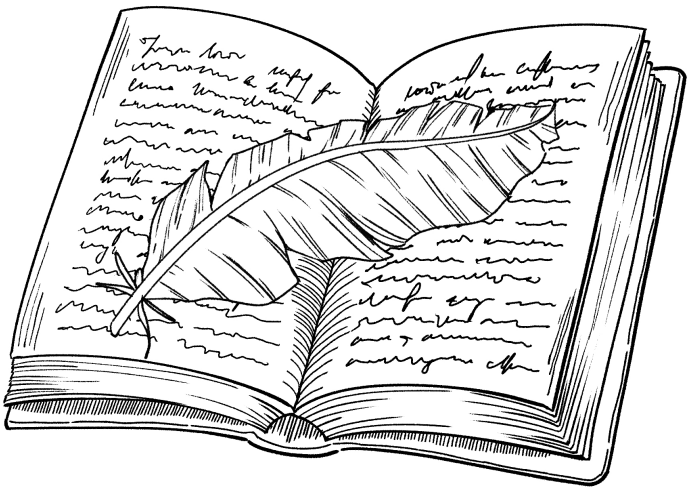
Max smiled again. "I'm glad. And I'm not *un*happy," he hastened to clarify. "I'm just… thinking about it all, okay?"

"Take your time," Rory assured him. "I came into this hoping for a mate. You had everything sprung on you like the wildest surprise. There isn't a timeline. I'm happy simply spending time with you."

"Me, too," Max said, sounding slightly surprised but pleased, and that made Rory smile.

They lapsed back into comfortable silence, listening to the music and eating cookies. Rory gazed around himself constantly, enjoying the splendor of the leaves around them, the trees in various shades of reds and oranges and yellows and browns. It shouldn't work, yet somehow, it always did, like nature's whole purpose was to unite disparate beings into a harmonious whole.

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Chapter Thirteen

Max

Ever since Rory had come into Max's life, it felt like it had been turned on its head. The death of his parents had rearranged his entire life, and since then, he'd gotten a bit complacent. Maybe it was no surprise he didn't quite know how to react to this new upheaval.

But unlike the death of his parents, Rory's appearance had brought so many positive things into Max's life.

In the week since they'd visited Mr. Jones, the shop had been further transformed. (Although there were still rude customers who called and demanded books that didn't belong to them or wanted spells instantly as if Max were a computer.) It now always smelled like pumpkin spice, Alex had redone the window display to be full-on Halloween themed, and little decorations had snuck their way into the store day by day until it looked incredibly festive.

Rory regarded everything with the biggest smile on his face, and Max had slowly come to the realization that he'd put up with as many decorations as the man wanted to put that look on his face.

(What was Christmas going to look like?)

As Rory had predicted, Alex had been delighted by the idea of taking on more responsibility and being able to work on weekends when Rory and Max went back to Mr. Jones's to work on the spellbooks. (Thankfully, this translated easily enough into the idea of a large private collection to be catalogued.)

It turned out their birthday was at the end of November, so it was only a few more weeks until they were sixteen and could work longer hours, as well as more hours on the weekend.

They'd said they were willing to start beforehand, because of course they had, but Max put his foot down and insisted they wait. There was no way he was going to risk some government body getting interested in his shop and fining him or coming to investigate. Plus, although Max did understand Alex's argument that it was barely a month away and it wasn't like they were going to change much between now and then, the law had been put in place to protect children. Max didn't want to overload Alex or take advantage of their kind nature.

Plus, if Max intended to visit Mr. Jones's collection for the foreseeable future, he probably needed to plan better. Alex had proved themselves to be very capable, but they were still only almost-sixteen. Perhaps someone with more experience was a good idea for a weekend manager.

When Max had raised the idea with Rory, he'd been extremely supportive—and pointed out that Max taking some days off was also a good thing.

"I'd be going away every weekend!" Max pointed out, shocked.

Rory shot him a look. "You'd be going away every weekend *to work*. What if a part-time manager worked Saturday through Tuesday, and you actually had two days off per week?"

Max just stared at him.

Rory huffed a laugh. "I know time off isn't something you're super familiar with, but we could work our way up to it."

"I'll think about it," Max said, shaken.

He hadn't hired Alex or Rory to get more time off; it had been because they needed him and so that he could work on his spellbooks. Mr. Jones's spellbooks fell under the same category. But actual days off? Nothing to do with work at all?

Why was that so difficult to contemplate? What would Max do with himself?

And then Max thought about being able to spend the time with Rory, and suddenly, it made a lot more sense.

He'd asked Rory to stay in human form at night since they got back, and he'd slept more soundly than he had in years. Sometimes, they woke pressed up against one another, but that was okay. Rory had never tried to take advantage, and Max had found himself relaxing more and more, certain in the knowledge that Rory was always going to put Max's needs first.

So… Max would try to do the same in reverse. He wanted to spend time with Rory, and he wanted Rory to know how much he valued him. He'd never imagined wanting to spend so much time with another person, but now there was nothing that he wanted more.

It was unexpected, but also kind of the best thing that had ever happened to Max. He still wasn't sure that he believed in magic with a capital M *or* fate, but he could agree that he felt lucky—or maybe blessed—that Rory had found him. However it had come about, it was awesome, if sometimes confusing, like when Rory happily announced one evening as they were coming up from the back room that he was working on their costumes.

"Costumes?" Max asked, staring at Rory, who was gazing at him earnestly.

"Of course," Rory said, looking at him like he was the weird one. "Halloween is on the 31st. The bookstore is open. We all have to be in costume. I thought we could have a story hour—or more like a story 'twenty minutes' or so, because I'm sure parents will need to get their kids on to the next thing. But we'll give out candy, and I'm looking to see if we can get a good deal on small books that we could give out, too. Something that kids can easily carry and which will outlast the candy."

Max tried to digest this. Rory's face was lit up, his enthusiasm obvious. Max had always treated Halloween like… any day of the week. He'd made sure that his shop was shut and the lights off to reduce the chance that the front window was going to get egged.

"Oh!" Rory said, eyes even brighter. "And I talked to the D&D crew, and we're also going to dress up in costume for the game on the 30th. Obviously. Everyone's going to come in character."

"They are?" Max repeated blankly.

Rory grinned. "Yup! It's going to be so much fun. And if you don't want to do anything about a costume, I can take care of all of it."

"How about you show me what you're thinking?" Max suggested, both in self-preservation but also because he wasn't categorically opposed to something that made Rory so happy. It was a weird feeling, wanting someone else to be happy like this. He'd felt it for Evie, too, but she'd been his orphaned sister, and it had been all mixed up in responsibility and their parents dying.

With Rory, it was a lot less complicated. Sure, Max was kind of supporting Rory, but in all honesty, Rory had been doing fine before him and would no doubt do fine after him. (Max grimaced. He didn't like that thought at all.) Max might not think that spending a decade as a bird was a great idea, but it

had clearly worked for Rory. He hadn't seemed to be suffering in any way, and Max was sure that he could go back to that life whenever he needed or wanted to.

Max was providing him with creature comforts in large part because Max *wanted* to provide them. He *wanted* Rory to be happy. And Rory seemed to be determined to bring so much into Max's life.

His life was so rich now that couldn't quite figure out how he wasn't totally overwhelmed *or* how he'd been content before. Somehow, Rory made it work. (And maybe Evie had had more of a point than he was ever willing to admit about how circumscribed his life had become.)

MAX

Apparently, we're doing costumes at the bookshop for Halloween.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

OMG, who are you, and what have you done with my brother?

MAX

It was Rory's idea.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

OBVIOUSLY. Rory is the best, and we're going to become best friends.

MAX

You can't have him.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

…

MAX

Don't say it.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

As long as you understand that I am *biting my tongue so hard*

MAX

Thank you for your restraint.

We can talk about it later.

Just not right now.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

I love you.

MAX

I love you, too.

Max's life was brighter than he'd ever expected it to be, honestly. It was pretty amazing.

Almost every night, Max and Rory worked in the back room, both of them reading, just in their own way. Nōwē enjoyed the addition of someone who would play with her, Max liked the quiet company, and since they'd met, Rory had always wanted to spend time with him. Sometimes, even now, Rory would transform into a bird and come cuddle on his shoulder rather than sitting in human form, but that worked, too.

Rory was continuing to play D&D, and the shenanigans had seemed only to magnify. Yesterday, they'd only survived because Edward's besotted dragon had come to rescue them. It had been a near-run thing, and Max preferred not to rely on a dragon NPC to get them through their troubles.

Max had also introduced Rory to Doctor Who. He'd started with the Eleventh Doctor because—

"Rory!" Rory's face had been wreathed in smiles. "There's a cool character called Rory! This is the best!"

Max had known that Rory would be this excited, and watching an episode every few nights meant that they would get to watch it for quite a while. (Was Max making sure they had activities that explained why Rory was still living with him? Well, he wasn't *not* doing that.)

This evening, he was on his own for one of the first times since Rory had come to live with him. Alex had left at four, the shop had closed at six, and Max was in the back room on his own because Rory was down the street at

the café. He and Gemma, the café owner, were brainstorming something about Halloween and a collaboration. (Max had stopped questioning it and just let them do their thing now.)

Max couldn't quite reconcile how strange it was to be on his own. That had been the norm for *years*, but it already felt a bit uncomfortable and not at all desirable. He seemed to have a lot more trouble concentrating without Rory present, too. Nōwē was also irritated because she'd lost her play buddy. She batted a few times at Max's shoelaces and wasn't impressed when all she got was scolded.

As much as Max didn't believe in fate, he did think sometimes about the strange chain of events that had started with Rory crashing into his window and led to Rory living with him, Alex coming to work for him, and Mr. Jones inviting them to visit…

A lot of wonderful things had started happening to Max since Rory had come into his life. He was able to answer more spell requests than ever before, which was helping to support paying both Alex and Rory—though Rory still didn't want a bank account, so Max continued to set money aside for him.

Max's desire to make a catalogue that was accessible to everyone was only growing. And yes, that meant that he'd eventually be out of a job, or at least the job would change. There'd be fewer unknown spells, but Max believed it would be worth it. There were still Spellsmiths, and as long as they created spells, there should be someone here to verify them. There'd no doubt be families who hoarded no matter what. But if they could have a major repository? If things were so well labeled that any witch could help their fellow witches find what they needed?

Oh, yes, Max wanted all of that.

But he was getting ahead of himself. He was lucky that Rory and Alex were happy out front, giving Max more time to work on spells like he was doing—or supposed to be doing—right now. That didn't mean it was going to last. If nothing else, Alex would graduate high school in a couple years. They didn't know what would actually happen when Mr. Jones passed away. And perhaps at some point, Rory would decide spending all his time with Max wasn't what he wanted to do anymore.

Max had been on his own since his parents died. His relationship with Evie was complicated by the fact that he'd raised her since she was seventeen. She was a whole-ass adult now, of course, but it was hard to break the habit of

years. It was hard to believe that he should be leaning on her rather than the other way around.

And her energy could feel overwhelming in a way that Rory's didn't. He wasn't entirely certain why. Now, somehow, Max was living with someone else, spending most of his time with that someone else, and had never been more content. If he looked at each of the separate pieces, it didn't seem possible that they could combine to this wonderful whole that he was faced with every day.

It was weird and awesome all at the same time.

Max knew that he was grumpy—especially pre-coffee—and that he was a lot for some people to take, but Rory didn't seem to notice that. He made coffee for Max and didn't try to talk to him before he'd consumed it, and he was helpful and sweet and hot and—

Max's brain screeched to a halt. *Hot*? Max could generally be trusted to be the most oblivious person in the world when it came to physical details. If pressed, he could agree that someone was aesthetically appealing, but it was always an afterthought to him, and often not something he even remarked upon on his own. He wasn't sure that he could think of another time when he'd voluntarily and spontaneously identified someone as being attractive.

Did he think Rory was attractive? He envisioned Rory's face, with his wild blond hair and bright honey eyes and kissable lips, and—

Had Max's brain or body figured this out without his input? What if he envisioned kissing Rory, or pressing his body against the other man's…?

Huh. Max didn't think his dick had done this since he'd hit puberty, not based on imagining an encounter with an actual person as opposed to a standard bodily reaction. (He'd jerked off in the shower when his body seemed to require that, but it had always been absent of any sort of desire for or attraction to another person. He'd genuinely just labeled himself as uninterested and moved on, unsure what the big deal was.) He hadn't bothered to look into it too much—he didn't really care about labels and he wasn't interested in connecting with anyone about it—but he'd always assumed he was asexual. He'd done enough research, though, to wonder now if he was actually demisexual and attracted to people that he formed a close emotional bond with.

The truth was that Max didn't get close to people very often. He didn't like people as a general rule, and being a witch just added another layer of distance. He kept huge parts of himself from most people, he had the bookshop taking up so much of his time, and just the idea of a hookup was an

utter turn-off for him. Those few occasions in college had been incredibly lackluster. (Zero shade on those it worked for. It absolutely did not work for Max.) Those few attempts with boyfriends that he'd been hiding from had been dismal. And even the couple attempts with a witch here or a shifter there had been more because he thought maybe he *should* or because Evie was certain she'd found someone for him. He'd never given much of himself, and he hadn't gotten much back in return. Apparently, that mattered.

Maybe if he'd figured it out sooner, he could have had a better relationship before this, but he was inclined to think that he'd figured it out exactly when he was supposed to. He was working this out about himself *because* he was emotionally connected to Rory. And Rory accepted him exactly as he was and clearly didn't expect any surprise revelations.

(*Was* that fate? Or the Magic? Did Rory have the right end of the stick after all? Max still wasn't sure. But he was maybe… slightly more convinced than he had been. In part because Rory didn't seem to be trying to convince him. He'd just shared his belief and left Max to make his own decision.)

Max was thirty-eight years old, and it wasn't like he thought he knew everything about everything. (To the contrary, the more he learned, the more he realized there was so much more out there *to* learn.) But it hadn't occurred to him that there might be an aspect of himself that he didn't know very well. Which, he supposed, probably showed how much he still had to learn here, too.

But what happened after this? Did he announce it to Rory? Did Max do nothing? Should he wait and confirm? Should he test it somehow? His stomach twisted uneasily. He didn't want to mess anything up with Rory. The man was amazing, and the last thing Max wanted was to somehow wreck things because he couldn't figure himself out.

Rory had always told him that there was zero pressure and he wanted to be in Max's life however Max wanted, but was he actually prepared for what Max wanted to change? Or what if Max was wrong, and it turned out this was an evening's daydream?

Frowning, Max decided he'd think about it. He *wasn't* hiding; he could practically hear Evie making that accusation. He was being sensible because this was a big deal, and Rory meant a lot to him. He'd make sure the feeling was… was *reproducible*, and then he'd consider mentioning it to Rory. Or he'd try to subtly test the waters. Not that he thought subtle was one of his skills, but maybe there was a first time for everything.

Something crashed somewhere beneath Max, and he jolted. That had come from… the basement? It had sounded *loud*. Had someone fallen? He remembered that he'd given Alex permission to spend an extra hour in the basement sorting some of the boxes of books.

There was another crash, and this unfroze Max. He sprang to his feet and bolted out of the room. Nōwē was wailing, and Max skidded down the hall. His cat had just shot out of the basement and screeched at him.

"I'm going!" Max said before clattering down the stairs. He burst into the basement and then windmilled to what would no doubt have been a hilarious halt in any other circumstances, because *there was a bear in his basement*.

It looked like a grizzly or a black bear—there was a difference between them, but just at the moment, Max didn't have the slightest idea what it was, because *there was a bear in his basement*. It was gigantic and dark brown, and that's where Max's knowledge ended. He was pretty sure that with one of them, you were supposed to fight them off, and with the other, you were supposed to play dead. The fact that he didn't know which was which had never mattered before, because Max didn't go anywhere where bears lived. In fact, he kind of *avoided* places like that.

How had it gotten in? *Why* had it gotten in? There wasn't any food down here. Sure, the shop smelled nicer now thanks to Rory and the cookies and the pumpkin spice, but surely not enough to lure a bear into the middle of the city. And, oh, good god, where was Alex? Had the bear eaten them? What would Max say to Alex's mom? Max's eyes flitted frantically around the room, but there was no sign of Alex, no sign of anything except the bear—

And finally, Max's brain caught up with his emotions.

Fuck me sideways.

The not-attacking, terrified-looking bear who was in the basement where Alex was supposed to be and was looking like it had crashed into the table and knocked over some boxes of books.

Max drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, calming the fuck down. Now that adrenaline hadn't hijacked his entire nervous system, he could feel the buzz of magic that told him he was in the presence of a magical being, a tell-tale sign that only appeared once witch and shifter kids hit late puberty and came into their magic.

This had always seemed weird to Max; why didn't it slowly accumulate as they grew and become noticeable in increments? On the other hand: magic. Clearly, it could work however it wanted.

Max had only ever experienced coming into his own magic, obviously. He'd been seventeen, and as a witch, he had the much better end of the stick, as far as he was concerned. One day, the buzz had just been there, and his parents, as witches, had recognized it. They'd taught him a simple spell, and for the first time ever, Max had been able not just to sketch the spell with his finger, he'd actually been able to power it with magic. It had been instinctive. He'd drawn the spell, and his magic had immediately wanted to fuel it. And that was it, he was a witch.

He'd never thought about a witch who came from a family of non-witches. (Not common, but it *did* happen. There also had to be witches who were orphans or adopted and wound up in the normal person system.) Max had *never* considered what happened if you were a shifter who didn't know you were a shifter, and the first sign of magic was shifting for the first time.

Max stepped forward, even though his instincts were still clamoring at him that he needed to back away. "Alex, it's okay."

Big brown eyes latched onto him, and the sound that came out of their mouth was definitely not human words. They cut off abruptly, jaw snapping shut over monster teeth. (Okay, not actual monster, that was probably prejudiced. Max just wasn't used to being faced with actual bear teeth in an actual bear jaw attached to a living bear that could *use them*.)

Max tried again. "Okay, that was an asinine thing to say. I mean, I'm sure this is scary as fuck. I've never turned into an animal, but this is actually totally normal for shifters. Those are people who can change between an animal form and a human form. I get the feeling that before this moment, neither of us knew you could do that."

Alex made a mournful sound that was still totally non-human.

Max continued, "Yeah, so, it's like a super big secret that we can't tell normal humans. Since you don't know anything about it, I'm guessing your dad was a shifter and didn't tell you or your mom. Which is kind of a shitty thing to do, but I don't actually know anything about the situation, so I'm going to shut up about that for now. The important thing is that you're here, and I know all about shifters, and—shit!" Max yanked out his phone. "I'm just going to call Rory. Rory is actually Red. The cardinal, you know? He's a shifter, I mean."

Alex made a weird sound that Max was… pretty sure was supposed to be a scoff.

Rory picked up the phone on the third ring. "Hey, Max, is—?"

“I need you back here now,” Max interrupted urgently. “In the basement. It’s an emergency.”

“On my way!”

Max was maybe a little bit in love with Rory for not even asking any questions.

Max eyed the bear, who had stopped panting in huge heaving breaths and had actually managed to sit up. They were still looking at their paws like they’d never seen them before—which, fair—but they didn’t look like they were going to go on a rampage.

There was the sound of thundering footsteps—Rory must have run the entire way—and then he appeared at the top of the stairs.

He took in the situation in an instant, clattering down the stairs and then advancing on Alex with the biggest smile on his face. “Oh, Alex, you’re *magnificent.*”

Alex made another growly rumble cry.

“You’re not human right now, that’s true,” Rory said, sounding entirely sympathetic. “I’m sure it’s been a very great shock.”

Alex made another one of those sounds that Max interpreted as a scoff.

Rory’s smile only got wider. “Yeah, I’m really sorry about that. We can’t see shifters or witches until they come into their magic. It’s unfortunate in situations like yours, but it keeps little ones safe when they’re young and can’t protect themselves. But you found me and Max, so you’re not doing this on your own. We can explain everything, and we can talk to your mom. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Somehow, it sounded a lot more convincing when Rory said it. Alex seemed to think so, too, because some of the lines of tension seemed to fall out of the… bear. (It was going to take a while to get used to that.)

“Would it be alright if I touched you?” Rory asked. “You can totally say no. But I feel like you maybe need a hug.”

Another weird growl sound, but Alex’s head moved in a very visible nod. Rory leaned in and wrapped his arms as far around as they would go—not very far, because Alex was a *bear*.

“Come here,” Rory called.

It took Max a moment to realize Rory was talking to him, and then he hurried over, ignoring the part of his brain that was still trying to catch up to the fact that this wasn’t a *bear*, it was Alex.

A little bit gingerly, Max leaned into Alex and hugged them. They were *solid*, packed with fur and flesh and muscle. They were also warm and cozy,

and this close, Max could feel the buzz of magic even more clearly, which soothed his instincts even more.

Yes, they were huge and had to be at least 400 pounds and could easily kill him, but they were also a shifter and *Alex*.

Rory was still talking in a soft, soothing voice, and he pulled back a bit so that he could look at Alex. He was gently stroking their fur. Max decided to do the same thing. Alex looked way calmer than they had when Max had found them thrashing in the basement.

“I know it seems like an unhelpful thing to say right now because you feel like you just transformed into a bear for the first time, but there’s always been a bear inside you.” Rory made a bit of a face. “Or maybe it’s better to say that there’s always been a possibility of a bear, just like even when you were a child, there was the possibility of an adult.”

Alex made another growling noise, and Rory let out something that was one hundred percent a giggle.

“Definitely don’t think of the bear like puberty.” Rory shook his head vehemently. “That’s all wrong.”

There was a totally weird sound coming out of Alex’s mouth which after a moment, Max realized was probably what a bear sounded like when it was trying to laugh. Huh. New, weird experiences all round today.

Rory tried again. “Your body is growing and maturing as you age, and your second body kind of does, too. Just… inside, where nobody can see it yet. There are all sorts of debates about whether it would be better for kids to shift right after they’re born or when they’re a few years old, but that’s not how shifters work in real life.” Rory smiled at Alex. “There are some great fantasy books out there that have their own version of shifters, and sometimes they have fabulous ideas. Gotta love everyone’s ingenuity. I’m sure some of them are actual shifters, but I think most of them are normal people who have a really great imagination.”

Alex let out a plaintive noise.

Rory told them, “You have to treat *all* the stories as fiction. They are not how-to guides for an actual shifter. The thing is, most shifters live with their families, and a number of them live in packs or prides or groups or whatever.”

Another rumbling growl from Alex, and Rory explained, “Wolves and a variety of cats are some of the most common shifters, but there are actually all sorts. Mostly land-based, some air like me, and water-based are extremely rare. They’re not very practical for land-based humans, and they don’t seem to have developed—or they’re really good about hiding.”

It had never occurred to Max that water-based shifters could be hiding, but that was a good point. Would he want to trust those around him when his animal form required water to survive?

Rory continued, “Some of the packs and prides are very traditional, but not all of them. I’d say it was probably about 50/50 the last time I talked to anyone about it. I spent the last few years as a bird, so I wasn’t paying that much attention to anything.”

Alex stiffened in obvious alarm.

Rory patted them soothingly. “Oh, no, sorry, I shouldn’t have said it like that. That was my choice. You’re not going to get stuck like this, and you definitely shouldn’t spend the next few years in bear form. Way harder to hold paintbrushes as a bear.”

Alex made one of those huffing noises that actually translated pretty well in bear form.

Rory was grinning again. “Sorry, sorry. Like I said, most shifters stay with their families, at least to get through all of this. Their group of shifters help them through the transition and make sure they learn how to control their shift. Then they can go off and keep living their lives. Many go to college or whatever else they want in the wider world.” Rory paused for a second, like he was figuring out how to say something. “You’ve got animal instincts now. But this is still you. You *can* be startled and be more likely to react like a bear, for example, so that’s why it’s important to practice, but the whole full moon thing is a total myth. There isn’t a point where a bear brain takes over without your control or anything like that.”

Alex slumped in what Max was pretty sure was pure relief. Max readjusted his position and kept petting them. This no doubt broke all sorts of employer/employee rules… but it wasn’t every day your employee turned into a bear and panicked.

Rory looked like he was trying to put into words things that he didn’t normally have to articulate. “With shifters, it’s more like… it’s you, but in bear form, and bears have different instincts than humans do. So you get those instincts that mean you’re more likely to walk on all fours instead of two legs—although as a bear, you can actually do both!—and you’re not going to instinctively wipe your eyes in bear form because you’ve got claws. Right? Those animal instincts are there to protect and help you, not harm you. Got it?”

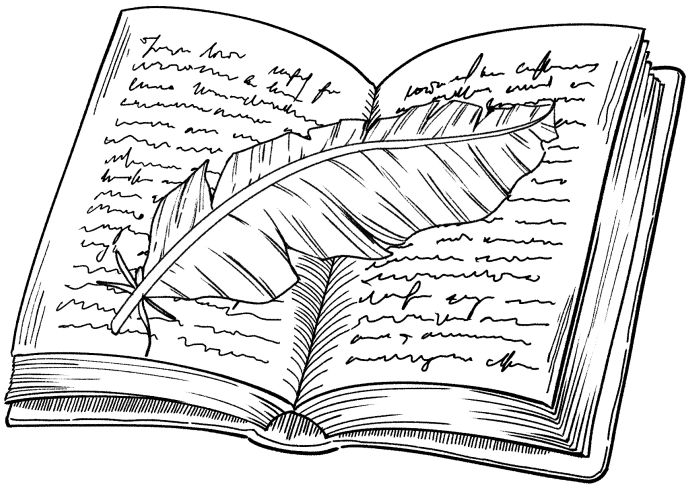
The bear—Alex—nodded again.

“The bear instincts are louder when you’re a bear,” Rory continued, “like you’d expect, so that they can help you do bear things. You always keep your own mind, but just like you can run on emotions and instinct when you’re human, you can do the same thing as a bear. But you don’t have to. You can also be calm and focused and as close to human as you’re going to get when you’re a seven-foot, 300-pound black bear.”

Ah, black bear. Max trusted that Rory knew what he was talking about. He’d follow up later.

Rory’s smile was kind as he asked, “Now, I’m assuming you’d like to change back?”

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Chapter Fourteen

Rory

Alex growled, *Oh, my god, holy fuck, yes, please.*

Well, it wasn't words precisely, but it was the meaning of the words delivered straight to Rory's mind. Non shifter animals conveyed sentiments, but with shifters, it was extremely close to human speech.

"Sometimes, it can take a little while to get the hang of the transformation. That's totally fine," Rory explained as reassuringly as he could. "It just takes a bit of practice. It's a big change, but I know you're going to get it."

Rory and the mythical shifters hadn't experienced this at all. They had simply *become* when the Magic had willed it so. They'd all started out in their animal forms, and they'd turned into humans when they were ready to do so. Rory had no idea how long he'd been alive before becoming human; it hadn't occurred to him to try to measure it. When the time had come, he'd instinctively known how to shift between forms, and it had happened without hesitation.

Over the centuries, though, he'd spent time with a variety of shifters, and he was confident he could guide Alex. If he was wrong, he was sure they could find someone else to talk to. If they couldn't find anyone closer, Mr. Jones's secretary, Peter, was a shifter, and they could probably drive up there and get help. Or maybe not, with a bear. Would Peter come down and

leave Mr. Jones for that long? Rory had gotten the sense that Peter barely left his side. But they'd cross that bridge when they came to it.

Rory might be atypical, but he *was* still a shifter. What else did Alex need to know?

"Oh," Rory exclaimed, as he realized he hadn't mentioned this yet. "One thing to get out of the way right away: romance books and monster movies *made it up completely.* When you shift back to human, you're still going to be wearing all your clothes. None of this, 'oh look, I shifted and tore through all my clothing,' or 'somehow, I perfectly ripped off my shirt, but my pants are clinging to me with only strategic tears.'"

Alex laughed, a weird grumble of noise as a bear. Rory beamed at them.

Thank god. Alex sounded incredibly relieved.

"Yeah, magic is weird," Rory confirmed, "but it's got us covered for that one. Literally. Remember, shifters have existed for thousands of years just like humans, and they absolutely did not have the resources to keep tearing up their clothes. Plus, there are plenty of countries and seasons where running around naked wouldn't work at all. So if you're envisioning anything from books and movies, it's probably totally wrong."

Alex's bear face tried to grimace. *It always looks painful.*

"Yeah, definitely don't rely on anything you've seen or read," Rory reiterated. "The thing is, it's magic. Witches like Max can cast spells to perform specific tasks—we'll get into that later, I promise—but shifter magic only manifests in their ability to shift between their animal and human form. But it *is* magic. It's not painful, it's not bones crunching or anything like that. For me, it's more like stretching and compressing, depending on which way I'm going. I feel heat, but I don't know if everyone does. There's a moment where I feel either too big or too small, and then I settle in my new form, and that's exactly how I'm supposed to be. I mean, it's how a human brain can fit in something the size of a cardinal, right? Nothing but magic explains that."

Max scoffed, and Alex gave their garbled bear laugh.

Rory grinned at them as he added, "Exactly. It feels more like *flowing* than anything else. It's disorienting in the moment, but then you've changed from the one to the other, and you're how you're supposed to be. For this first change, since you didn't expect it, I think your human instincts won out over your bear ones. You panicked and got scared—which is a totally reasonable reaction to unexpectedly turning into a bear."

I’ve never been so scared in my entire life, Alex admitted.

“But we’ve got you,” Rory told them firmly. “We’re not going to let anything happen to you. Do you want to see me change?”

Alex nodded. *Yes, please*.

So Rory let go of Alex completely, stepped back, and smiled at both Alex and Max, standing there watching him. Then he turned into Red. (Up until Max, his cardinal hadn’t had a name. Or it had had the same name that Rory-the-human had. But he wasn’t ever going to be anything but Red now.)

As Rory had promised Alex, there was no pain, just that moment where it felt like he was shrinking and being compressed, where everything was burning hot—but for Rory, that was a comfort—and then he was a bird again. A brief disorientation as he got used to the placement of his eyes, to having wings instead of arms, and then it was all good.

He fluttered off the ground and up to perch on Max’s shoulder for a moment and rub against his neck, because he couldn’t help himself. That felt like his perch now. Max gently stroked him.

Then Rory flew up to Alex and settled on the top of their head, looking down at a bear who was trying to peer up at him. Rory hopped around a few times, making Alex laugh. Rory took flight again, winging around the room, then settling on the floor, and an instant later, he’d stretched into his human body again.

“See?” Rory said, grinning. “Just like that. Kept my clothes, and no bones cracking and reforming. I don’t sprout feathers one by one or anything like that. Magic guides us between our forms. It’s as simple—and complicated—as that.”

But what if I don’t know how to do that?

Alex wasn’t panicking yet, but a certain amount of worry was in their voice.

“It helps to think like a human and stay calm, at least to start,” Rory told them, making sure to keep his own voice steady and reassuring, “which is why we’ve been having this conversation. It takes energy to shift. Most of it’s magical, but you’ll be tired, too, especially as you’re getting used to shifting. You’re also going to be hungry once you change back, and you’re not going to be able to change again for a bit.”

Totally fine with that! Alex declared resolutely.

Rory could just imagine.

“You need to focus on being human,” Rory told them. “And despite what this moment has probably made you think, shifting between forms is always a deliberate act. It might be a split-second decision, and it can be done on instinct in some ways, like if you’re trying to help someone, say. But this isn’t a Hulk situation. You don’t shift just because you’re angry.”

Thank god, Alex breathed.

Nodding sympathetically, Rory explained, “As much as it seems like it’s totally wild for this to happen during puberty, it actually isn’t adding more hormones to the mix. You feeling happy or sad or angry or whatever at the drop of a hat doesn’t mean you’ll be yo-yoing in and out of bear form. Now, it *can* mean that a young shifter makes a foolish choice and *decides* to shift because they’re angry, but that’s a different discussion.”

Can I never turn into a bear again? Alex asked hopefully.

“I wouldn’t recommend making any decisions about how you feel about this right after this first transformation. Give it a chance to settle in. Don’t depend on anything that you read in books or saw in movies. If you have a question about shifting, ask us, and if we don’t know, we’ll find someone who does.”

“One hundred percent,” Max confirmed. “I’m not an expert on shifters by any means, but I know a lot of witches, and there are plenty who are close to shifters or have one as a familiar.” Max coughed when Rory shot him a look. “Which is totally not something we need to get into right now.”

A familiar? Alex asked, sounding confused. *Like a witch and a black cat?*

“We’ll get into shifters and familiars later, I promise,” Rory said. It was an important topic, but one thing at a time. “Max is right. We know plenty of people, and we can definitely get help if we need it. I’m not an expert on four-legged shifters, for example, but I’ve seen a lot over the years.”

Aren’t you, like, thirty? Then Alex hastened to add, *I mean, no shade on your lived experience!*

Rory managed not to laugh. “Shifters don’t age the same way humans do. Our aging slows down, usually starting in our late twenties. We’ll get into that, too. There’s a lot, as you can probably tell, and this would have gone a lot more smoothly, obviously, if you’d known about it. When you grow up in a shifter household, even though you don’t shift through your childhood, your family would typically prepare you as if you were going to become a shifter.”

Does that always happen? Alex wanted to know.

Rory tilted his head back and forth. “A shifter mating with a shifter will result in a shifter 99.9% of the time. With witches, the percentage isn’t quite so high, but it’s true probably 97 to 98% of the time that they’ll have a witch. Occasionally, they’ll have a human instead. I don’t think there’s ever been a witch born of two shifters or a shifter born of two witches.”

Max shook his head. “No, never that I’m aware of.” He rolled his eyes. “There have in fact been a few infamous cases of adultery being demonstrated in spectacular ways—but always very belatedly, since, as we’ve just seen demonstrated, the magic only emerges late in puberty.”

Humans were so weird. Or maybe Rory just didn’t understand why people made such a big deal about parentage because he’d never had parents.

Rory continued, “When a shifter or witch mate with one another, it almost always results in either a witch *or* a shifter.”

Max said, “I’ve read of the occasional case where fraternal twins have been one shifter and one witch, but it’s rare. But one person isn’t both.”

Rory smiled. “Exactly. If a shifter or a witch mates with a human, the percentage drops dramatically. They’ll have *either* a shifter or witch like their magical parent *or* a human. I’m not sure of the exact percentage.”

“This one’s harder to track,” Max agreed. “I’ve heard children are slightly more likely to be magical. Getting a magical child becomes rapidly less likely the more generations away from the original witch or shifter. That’s a possible explanation, though, for why a shifter or witch will ‘spontaneously’ appear in a normal person’s family. But it’s not like we have studies to back any of this up. We’re a small population that’s in hiding to protect ourselves.”

Alex gave an audible sigh, even in bear form. *That makes sense, unfortunately.* They suddenly sat up straight, sounding alarmed. *I can tell my mom, though, right?*

“You can tell your mom,” Rory hastened to confirm. “There aren’t a lot of times where you’re permitted to tell people, but family is one of the exceptions. So if you chose a life mate, you’d be able to tell them. Normally, your family would already be aware, but there have been situations like yours before. We’ll tell your mother—and we can definitely do it together and start with my transformation before we show her yours. So what do you say we get you back to human form now?”

Yes, please.

Max stepped back a few steps, which was wise. The shift in mass could be disconcerting, plus Max probably didn't want to wind up petting Alex in human form.

Rory smiled at them. "Like I already explained, you're you no matter what. Sometimes you're Alex shaped like a bear, and sometimes you're Alex shaped like a human, but you're always Alex. As a bear, you can choose to let your bear instincts take over more, but you've always got access to your human brain. And as silly as it sounds, you really just have to envision yourself being human again."

What? That's it? Alex demanded.

Rory nodded. "Basically. Your magic needs to be built to do it, which is why no witch is going to be able to will themselves into or out of human form. But this is exactly what *your* magic is made to do. If your magic is exhausted, you might not be able to shift in the moment, but you'll regain the ability with food and rest. It's why shifter magic is so awesome, even if most people don't think of it as magic. Unlike witches who have to use spells, pure intent is what triggers your transformation. You need to think about the form you want to take; imagine the end state that you desire. Think about your human body and how much you want to be that shape again, and you will be."

It wasn't *quite* that straightforward, but that was essentially what happened, and there was no way Rory was getting into anything more complicated just yet. Alex had been through enough.

The basement grew silent except for their breathing… and then, quite suddenly, instead of a black bear, there was a human. Alex looked down at themself, then up and Rory and lurched forward to fling their arms around him. Rory caught them and hugged them back. Max came over and hugged them both.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Alex exclaimed. "Oh, my god, that was the scariest thing that's ever happened to me. Also the coolest, but it was so scary."

They started to cry, and Rory just hugged them tighter. Max's long arms wrapped around both of them, and it was perfect.

"It's okay," Rory soothed. "Let it all out. This was a lot, and it was really sudden, and your life is never going to be the same again."

Alex sobbed for a few more minutes, but then they pulled back from the hug and started wiping at their face. Max produced a handkerchief, and

Alex scrubbed at their skin.

"Thanks." Sheepishly, they added, "Sorry about that."

Before Rory could, Max said, "You definitely don't have anything to apologize for. I knew about shifters, and I still panicked when I came down here and saw a bear. I can't imagine what it would be like for someone who knew nothing about that life and suddenly *was* a bear."

Alex blew out a breath and managed a slightly shaky smile. "Yeah, it was kind of a lot. So you're telling me that shifters and witches are real? What about vampires? Zombies?"

Max and Rory shook their heads.

"Nope," Rory said.

"Shifters and witches are it, as far as we know," Max confirmed. "Shifting into an animal form is as wild and exciting as it gets."

"But you're a witch so you can do magic?" Alex said, their eyebrows raised.

"Oh, yeah," Max agreed with the ease of someone who'd known about witches and seen his parents cast spells all his life.

"Can I see something?" Alex asked, sounding intrigued.

"Sure," Max agreed.

He thought for a moment, and then his gaze fell on the thoroughly broken table that had definitely lost in the battle against the startled bear. He sketched a spell in the air, and Alex sucked in a breath when Max infused it with his magic. The spell glowed for a moment, hovering in the air, before it dissipated—and the table mended itself.

Alex muttered a stunned curse as the table pulled itself back together like a video of it breaking played in reverse. A moment later, it looked just as it always had, as though it had never been broken.

Alex approached it cautiously, putting out a hand. When that resulted in touching a solid table, they gave it a bit of a push.

"Wow," they breathed.

Max laughed, and Alex shot the two of them a grin. "You know, I'd be way more worried that I was having a psychotic episode except that you're not nearly as good at hiding shit as you think you are. What's in that back room? A whole bunch of magic stuff?"

Max shrugged, not looking all that apologetic. "Spellbooks, yeah."

Alex nodded. "And nobody else could see the bird on your shoulder, could they?"

Rory piped up, “He cast a charm on me so I didn’t quite come to people’s attention.”

Alex was nodding slowly, like they were processing all their memories anew. “And because you’re actually a human, you didn’t poop on anything.”

“Yeah, I can use my human instincts on that one,” Rory agreed.

“*That*’s good to know,” Alex said, sounding desperately relieved. “I really didn’t want to think about bear poop.”

Rory couldn’t help but laugh. Birds might annoy people with sending poop flying in flight, but there just wasn’t that much of it. The same could *not* be said for a bear.

Alex grinned. “And all those people who were calling for spells? That was real?”

Max and Rory nodded.

Now that the drama was over, Nōwē came down the stairs and went over to weave between Alex’s legs and then accept their pets.

Max explained briefly how Spellsmiths created spells and then anyone could use them.

He continued, “So if someone needs a spell they don’t know, they either have to go to a Spellsmith—expensive and annoying—or see if they can find the spell already in existence somewhere. And that means either finding an already labeled spell and trusting that it’s correctly labeled or getting a Spellreader to find the spell for you.”

Alex made a face. “It must go wrong sometimes.”

Max grimaced. “It absolutely can. The sanctions are harsh, though, for doing anything dishonest as a Spellsmith or Spellreader—or for pretending to be either of those when you aren’t. No one but a Spellsmith can design a spell. No one has ever been able to turn the finger movements of a spell into a language, though many have tried. Making a change to an existing spell can either break the spell entirely—the best-case scenario—or warp it so that something goes wrong. Spells should never be messed with, and while that gets drummed into the heads of witches from childhood before they even know for sure if they’re witches, someone always decides at some point that they know better.”

Alex made a disgruntled noise. “People are fools.”

“Exactly!” Max said triumphantly.

Rory laughed. “People are pretty good most of the time. Sometimes they make bad choices. But lots of them are really wonderful and do wonderful things.”

“You’re an optimist,” Alex told him.

Rory shrugged. He definitely was. He didn’t see how there was any value in dwelling on the bad things. He preferred to work towards a positive outcome.

Alex’s stomach grumbled loudly, and they flushed.

Rory grinned at them. “Told you you’d be hungry.”

Max said, “Magic isn’t exactly linked to your energy levels, but they often correlate, at least when it comes to depleting your magic. If you did enough to exhaust your magic, you’ll probably feel exhausted, too. Or at least I always do as a witch.”

Rory nodded, though this wasn’t something he’d really experienced, or at least not the way normal shifters did. After a burning, he supposed he was tired. But he could normally change forms back and forth as often as he wanted.

Alex nodded, “Okay, that makes sense. It’s like another type of muscle that you’ve tired out.”

Max see-sawed his hand. “It’s not an exact analogy, but yeah, that’s a good enough explanation for now. If you’re really tired but *haven’t* been using your magic—I mean shifting—you can probably still do it. As a witch, we can still cast, but when we’re tired, we’re more likely to make silly mistakes, so our spells are more likely to fail. I’m not sure if the same is true for shifting, since it’s not really a spell.”

They both looked at Rory, who shrugged. “I’ve never not been able to shift, but maybe I just don’t make those sorts of foolish errors.”

Max nudged him in the side with his elbow, and Alex laughed.

Alex’s stomach rumbled again, and Max pulled out his phone. “Shit, I meant to order food. Sorry. What do you want?”

Alex considered this. “Pizza?”

Max nodded. “Yeah, sure.”

Rory said, “While you order that, I’ll run upstairs and get you a couple sandwiches. PB&J okay?”

“You don’t have to do that,” Alex argued.

“It’s going to be at least forty minutes until the pizza is here,” Rory pointed out. “You definitely want to eat something before then.”

Max nodded encouragingly, so Alex shrugged. “Yeah, that would be great. Thank you.”

Rory popped upstairs, Nōwē keeping him company—i.e. hoping for food. It had been a bit of a traumatic day, so despite the fact that Rory had fed her already, he gave her an extra quarter of a can.

“Don’t tell your dad,” Rory whispered.

She shot him a look that didn’t even require words to translate. She was no fool.

And really, Max would see the partially emptied can in the fridge anyway.

Rory made three PB&J sandwiches, grabbed two apples from the crisper, and poured a glass of water. Then he thought better of it, wrapped the sandwiches in a tea towel and put them and the apples in a bag, grabbed the entire pitcher of water and two more glasses, and carried it all back downstairs.

Nōwē chose to return with him, since the hope of the best drama was still downstairs. She also had a strange fascination with olives from pizza, and while Max didn’t let her eat a lot of human food, there was the occasional treat that sneaked its way into her mouth.

Max and Alex had pulled up chairs at the D&D table, and Rory laid his bounty out. Alex looked surprised at all the food Rory had brought, but Rory just poured them all glasses of water and watched Alex immediately start eating.

Managing to talk in between bites, Alex looked at Rory. “Max said shifters didn’t have to shift. Is that right?”

Rory tilted his head back and forth. “It’s a little more complicated than that. We’re definitely not like werewolves—which are fictional. We’re not tied to the moon and an arbitrary cycle or anything like that. You’re not about to find yourself feeling compelled to shift.”

Alex looked immediately relieved.

Rory continued. “I might not be the right person to ask about this—which is why we can definitely find you other shifter resources—because I’ve always felt very strongly like both bird and human. The idea of not changing between the two of them is almost unthinkable to me. Not because I’m compelled to be either but because I can’t imagine picking between them.”

Alex nodded slowly as they stared at Rory. “I guess that makes sense. The bear still feels totally foreign to me. Like, it doesn’t feel like something that’s me. So there’s no impulse at all to change into it.”

They drank another glass of water and took a huge bite out of another sandwich.

“Absolutely,” Rory answered. “I think some of that is probably the shock talking. From what I’ve seen of you, you’re a pretty curious person, and I can’t imagine you not wanting to investigate more and find out if a bear *can* hold a paintbrush after all.”

Alex laughed, but there was a speculative gleam in their eye. “You’re… not wrong.”

Rory grinned. “I’ve been shifting for years, so it feels second nature to me. You may discover over time that you grow more comfortable with it, and you may not. I’m lucky in that it’s easy for me to blend in. It would be much harder for you.”

“Right,” Alex agreed, nodding again. “You’re small, and you’re a species that’s native to the area. If you were in Africa or South America or somewhere they don’t have cardinals, you’d stick out more—although you’re little, so people might not notice.”

“It’s much easier to blend in when you’re an animal people expect to see,” Rory side-stepped, since if he were in another country, he’d simply shift into a bird that was native to that area. But since no normal shifter could do that, Rory couldn’t advertise it. He eyed Max. “Have we talked about the Great World Spell yet?”

Max shook his head even as Alex said, “The what?”

Rory inclined his head at Max. “You’re the spell expert.”

Smiling faintly, Max said, “Definitely not an expert when it comes to this particular spell. My inability to be subtle notwithstanding, witches and shifters are actually able to hide as well as we do because of something called the Great World Spell. It’s a massive spell that was cast centuries ago, and it helps normal people not notice witches and shifters. It’s really important that we do everything we can to hide ourselves, but when there’s an emergency or something goes wrong or people are just way less subtle than they think they are, the Great World Spell is there. It’s not quite a spell to keep people from noticing things, and it’s not quite a forgetting spell, but sort of an amalgam of the two? With some reasonable doubt thrown in? It helps make normal people discount what they saw if it was something

unusual. They might forget it, not even register it to begin with, or tell themselves that they must not have seen what they thought they saw."

Alex grimaced. "So it's magic constantly messing with our minds?"

Max and Rory exchanged glances.

Grimacing, Max conceded, "Well… sort of? Like I said, we really do try to fly under the radar whenever possible. If something goes wrong, though, and our existence is threatened, then the Spell smooths things over." Max blew out a breath. "It's especially important these days that witches and shifters are careful around exposures. The population of the earth has never been higher, and technology has never been more advanced. So now there's people and phones and cameras and going viral… The spell has a lot more to contend with than it did when it was made, and it's struggling."

"Can't you just… make a new spell?" Alex asked. "You've got those… spellmakers, don't you?"

"Spellsmiths," Max corrected. "And yeah, we have them. But no one knows how to make a spell that complex anymore. There were a few attempts made about a decade ago, and they failed utterly. The Great World Spell is not one to respond to a simple 'undo spell.' So even if we did figure out how to craft a new spell, we don't know how we'd replace the old."

Alex frowned. "Huh. That's not great. I mean, unless we totally mess up the world and plunge back into the Dark Ages, we're not about to have less technology any time soon."

"Yeah," Max agreed morosely. "So we need to be really careful all the time."

Alex nodded. "Got it."

"This is normally something that's drilled into magical kids from the time they're old enough to talk," Max added. "The Council also has harsh sanctions if anyone messes this up."

"You mentioned the Council before. Who are they again?" Alex wanted to know.

Rory jumped in. "They're a group of shifters and witches who've been elected to resolve major disputes and deal out punishments if required to shifters and witches. Because we live hidden amidst normal people, we're theoretically subject to the same laws they are, but there are times where that can't be enforced. A witch or shifter might be able to escape anything that a normal incarceration system would impose. Or sometimes putting them in a jail would risk exposing our world, like if a witch has a familiar."

“You mentioned those, too!” Alex exclaimed. “My head feels a bit like it’s going to explode, but I want to know more.”

Rory grinned. “Yeah, let’s just put a pin in that for a sec. The Council steps in when someone is a potential danger of exposure. They also deal with crimes the normal human systems wouldn’t recognize as crimes or can’t handle, like witches killing people with magic or shifters in their animal form, that sort of thing.”

Alex looked uneasy, and Max interjected. “Just like normal humans, witches and shifters can be good and bad people, and everything in between. We make up a much smaller percent of the population, though, and I believe the last census shows that the rate of crime amidst witches and shifters is lower than it is for the normal population. But it still exists.”

Alex frowned. “Does that mean that magical people are better than normal people? Like… fundamentally more good?”

“I don’t think anyone’s done a study on that.” Max shrugged. “Honestly, the bar isn’t super high.”

Alex and Rory laughed.

Rory pointed out, “Remember that witches and shifters both have magic. So it’s possible that they have access to options that make it less likely for them to need to resort to crimes.”

Max chimed in, “Or those resources mean they’re less likely to get caught.”

Rory shot him a look, but Max just shrugged, looking unrepentant.

The pizza arrived, and they continued to give Alex a crash course into a life that they should have known about this entire time. There was no way they were managing to tell Alex everything they needed to know, but it would hopefully be enough to get on with until they had time to learn more. They were also going to need to practice their shift and make sure they felt comfortable with it.

Alex ate an entire pizza on their own and looked shocked when they saw the empty box afterwards. “Is it even possible to be that hungry?”

Max laughed. “Evidently. Seriously, though. The first shift is the hardest, or that’s what I’ve heard. Your body is doing something it’s never done before, and it hasn’t figured out how to optimize fuel or anything yet. It’s going to get easier, but you’ll probably always want to have something to eat on hand when you shift.”

Rory nodded. He'd seen shifters eat an astonishing array of food over the years. Eating could never make you more magical than your maximum, but it absolutely worked to help restore depleted magic faster than rest alone.

"Now," Rory said, "is there anything else you think you need to know in the short term?"

Alex shook their head. "I don't think so. I know I don't have to shift. I know it's not going to happen just because I suddenly thought about a bear. I know I'll need plenty of food if I do shift. I know to never ever do it in public or where others who don't know about magic are."

Rory and Max nodded. Those were pretty much the basics.

"You can text or call us at any time," Max said, and Rory agreed immediately.

Really, they'd already told Alex they could do that before the shifter revelation, but it was extra true now.

"I have to tell my mom," Alex said, looking determined but kind of horrified.

"Yeah," Max agreed. "Good luck with that."

Alex shot him a panicked look, then seemed to realize he was joking and stuck their tongue out at him.

Max laughed.

Rory rolled his eyes, but he wanted to hug them both. "When would be a good time to talk to her? I wouldn't recommend waiting too long. It's a big secret in your life, and there's a chance she could find out by accident, and that tends to be awkward."

"Tell me about it," Alex grumbled. "She's on evenings this week, so she's not home until late tonight. Probably tomorrow would be best, to make it easier for her to talk to all of us. Maybe around ten?"

Max nodded. "Yeah, that's fine. And if we have to delay opening the shop for a bit, that's what we'll do. People can learn to live without us on Sundays."

Alex shot Max a look. "That's a terrible business practice."

Max shrugged. "Eh. You know I'm still working on how to do this without any people being involved."

"We can keep our eye out for customers, or I could go serve them," Rory suggested. "We can definitely talk to your mom as long as she needs. We'll do whatever it takes."

“Will the, uh, World Spell be trying to make her forget?” Alex wanted to know.

“It doesn’t tend to,” Rory told them with a shake of his head. “Not in any of the revelations I’ve ever seen, anyway. If it’s someone who’s being deliberately informed and they’re meant to know, the Spell seems to let that happen.”

“And this is why no one’s ever seriously considered trying to write a new Great World Spell,” Max put in. “It’s complex and probably does things we don’t even realize it’s doing.”

“This is all so wild,” Alex said. “I can’t believe it’s my life.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Max said, deadpan. “Surprise!”

Alex snorted. “Not your fault.” They looked a little embarrassed. “I’m so glad the two of you were here to help me through this. I don’t know what I would’ve done without you.”

“We’re happy to have helped,” Rory assured them, and Max nodded emphatically. “And we’ll be there for you and your mom tomorrow. We’re going to figure this out together.”

Alex yawned, then looked surprised that they’d done so.

Max said, “And that’s a sign that it’s time to get you off to bed, especially before your mom gets home and wants to know why we kept you so late.”

Alex rose to their feet. “Yeah, alright.”

“We’ll walk you,” Max told them.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“But we’re going to anyway,” Max said smoothly. “You’ve been through a lot today, and it’s getting late on a Saturday night.”

“If you’re a *grandpa*,” Alex teased.

“Hey,” Max protested. “I might be old enough to be your father, but I am definitely *not* old enough to be your grandfather.”

Rory wasn’t sure there was a number big enough to express what number grandparent he could be to them. He wondered if Max had read any age-gap romances and what he thought of them.

Probably it wouldn’t be subtle to ask.

They got Alex safely home with many reassurances that they were available for anything Alex needed.

“Just text if the plan changes,” Max told them. “If your mom’s had the worst shift ever or something, it can probably wait a day or two.”

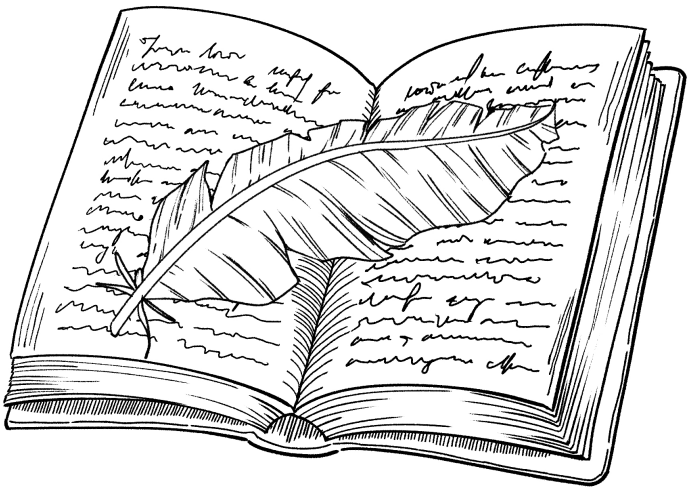
Alex nodded, thanked them again, and then slipped inside. Rory and Max began the walk back to the shop.

"What the hell," Max breathed out. "I did *not* think today was going to go like that."

"And we get to deal with Alex's mother tomorrow," Rory reminded him cheerfully.

Max groaned, and Rory laughed.

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Chapter Fifteen

Max

The revelation actually didn't go nearly as badly as Max had feared that it would. Alex's mother had a very logical mind, so while she was initially resistant to the idea of magic and shifters, she found their very concrete examples irrefutable.

Max had realized early on that they'd miscalculated a little, though. Well, he didn't disagree that it was good to tell Alex's mother right away, before she thought they were hiding something or thought Max and Rory were a bad influence or found out by accident. But it was only a little over twelve hours since Alex had shifted for the first time—they couldn't shift again yet.

So they lost a bit in explaining that her child *was* a shifter who could turn into a bear, they just couldn't do it right now. On the other hand, Natalie was a nurse, and she always wanted her child to be safe and happy. When they laid out the importance of not shifting too often and how the first shift was an extra strain because the body had never done it before, she was certainly not about to insist that Alex shift right now to prove that what they were saying was true.

Rory was an excellent shifter and had even done it while holding her hand as a human and then winding up perched in that hand on his little bird feet as Red. That was some precision shifting right there. But it made it pretty much impossible for her to think that they were somehow using really clever sleight of hand and illusions to make her only think that he was changing into a bird.

Max explained, “Although children don’t display magic until sometime in puberty, they’re usually raised with either shifters or witches or both and taught all of this growing up so that it’s less of a shock when they change or use magic for the first time. But this is hardly an isolated event. Especially with human-witch or human-shifter unions, there’s a chance that information doesn’t get passed on. Sometimes, children are orphaned, and so on.” He hesitated for a moment. “Did you have any idea about Alex’s father? It’s not one hundred percent certain that he was a bear shifter, but it’s highly likely.”

Natalie looked overwhelmed. “I’m going to have to think about everything you’ve said. Kevin was a big guy, but lots of men are.”

“Oh, definitely,” Rory agreed. “There *can* be a correlation between the size of a shifter animal and the size of a shifter human, but there isn’t necessarily. The big shifters are *often* big humans, but it’s not like there aren’t lots of big humans who aren’t shifters.”

Natalie said, “We met when I was twenty and just finishing up my BSN. He was twenty-four and working as a nature photographer.” She hesitated. “You think he was really off being a bear?”

“Was he taking photographs?” Max asked practically.

She nodded. “Yeah, I still have a lot of his work. He took beautiful photographs.”

“Then it’s unlikely he was being a bear, or at least not all of the time. Bear paws aren’t great for taking photos.”

She blinked at him. Max hoped his response hadn’t come across as too flippant.

“It’s possible that he enjoyed being out in nature in part because of his animal shifter side, yes,” he explained further. “There are shifters who have nine to five desk jobs, but probably proportionally, there are more who find some way to spend more time outdoors. Again, there’s no hard and fast rule.”

“But it wouldn’t surprise you to learn that he was a shifter with that job,” Natalie prompted.

“No,” Max agreed.

Rory shook his head as well and added, “I have the benefit of being able to shift into a small form just about anywhere. I can shift inside and fly around, and while it’s not the same as being out in nature, it’s nearly as good. A bear shifter would find it harder to shift inside. He may have chosen a job that gave him reasons to get outside as often as possible.”

Natalie sniffed. “I can’t believe he didn’t tell me.”

Max and Rory exchanged glances. Max was usually pretty blunt, but he didn't want to be the one to tell this woman that her partner *could* have told her but hadn't. They'd already clarified why it was okay for her to know now that Alex had shifted, so maybe she'd figured it out. It seemed better not to mention it.

Gently, Rory said, "Sometimes, people worry about how someone will react to shocking news. It doesn't mean they don't want to tell you or that they don't trust you. He probably thought he had a lot more time."

Natalie blew out a breath, her dark eyes bright and a little bit glassy.

"He did always act like he had all the time in the world," Natalie said in a slightly thick voice. "And now you're telling me that shifters live longer than humans. So he probably would have lived decades longer than me."

Max didn't want to tackle that one, and thankfully, Rory stepped into the awkward moment once again.

"He might have, but instead, you've lived years past him. Life expectancy isn't a guarantee. Unfortunately, humans are mortal, and you can't tell how long anyone will be with us."

She sighed, and some of the tension went out of her shoulders. "No, I suppose not." She pushed her hair out of her eyes. "We see that at the hospital every day. Improbable accidents and unexpected illnesses and all the ways that people can be taken from us too soon. They said he was in the wrong place at the wrong time when he was shot. Do you think a hunter got him?"

Rory answered carefully, "If he was in his human form when he died, and I assume he was given that you learned of his death, then I don't think it terribly likely. My understanding is that shifters usually stay in the form they were in upon death. It takes energy and concentration to shift, and that's a hard thing to do as you're dying. Not impossible, but not very likely."

Natalie swiped at her eyes, and Alex awkwardly gave their mom a hug. She hugged them back, hard.

"It doesn't really matter, I suppose," she said, sniffing and sounding annoyed with herself. "He's still dead, and he'd be dead whether he was killed for being a shifter or not. We just, uh, never got good answers about what happened, and it suddenly seems like there's a lot of questions I didn't know to ask."

"Did he always work on his own?" Rory asked.

Shaking her head, Natalie said, "No, he had a friend he worked with sometimes. We lost touch after… after. But Kev did that last photo shoot solo.

Quill wasn't available or something, and Kev said it was an opportunity he couldn't miss. He was always chasing the next great shot."

"I'm sorry you lost him," Max told her, feeling that twinge in his chest at all the memories that he'd buried. "It's never easy to lose family we care about."

She nodded, scrubbing at her face and looking like she was trying to pull herself back together. "Thank you. It wasn't easy. But we've done okay, haven't we?"

She looked at Alex, who nodded fiercely. "Of course we've done okay."

Turning her attention back to Max and Rory, she said, "I think moving here was exactly what we were supposed to do. I was trying to get away from my family. My parents didn't approve of Kevin, but they supported me and Alex anyway. I actually thought maybe they were better grandparents than they were parents. They often looked after Alex when I was working evening or night shifts, and it really seemed like they were being good. Supportive." Her lips compressed into a thin line. "They didn't think I should be encouraging Alex's artistic abilities. They thought if I hadn't had Alex, I would be a doctor by now. And then when they started in on Alex's gender expression… I thought I could counter the other stuff. I never wanted to be a doctor, and Alex was winning awards, which they liked. But that last one." Her eyes were hard and bright. "Well. You only need to find your kid in tears thanks to your parents once. We had it out, they gave an ultimatum, and we moved out here."

"We're doing just fine, Mom," Alex said staunchly. "I don't need grandparents who don't like me the way I am. You got me out of there, we found Max and Rory, we're going to figure the whole bear thing out, and we're going to be so happy here."

She offered them a watery smile, and Alex hugged her again.

So… Max still wasn't totally sold on fate, but he could acknowledge that it was an interesting confluence of events that led to Alex finding him and Rory mere weeks before they exhibited their shifter traits for the first time and needed someone to guide them through it. Max went cold just thinking about what might have happened if a stranger had found them, or even if their mom had when she had no idea what was going on.

Thank goodness Alex had been here.

"Okay," Natalie said, sniffing and squaring her shoulders. "As wild as all of this is, let's say that I believe everything. What are our next steps?"

Rory said, "Alex, I know you mentioned never wanting to shift again. Was that stress talking, or would you prefer not to shift anymore?"

“We didn’t totally finish talking about it,” Alex said, looking uncertain. “You said it’s not like werewolves or the movies. Does that mean I *could* choose not to shift ever again?”

Rory tilted his hand back and forth in a see-saw gesture. “Sort of? There’s no external compulsion, like I said. It doesn’t happen just because you’re upset or angry or anything like that. But it *is* still a part of you. So while you could choose to suppress it, that’s not always the healthiest choice overall.”

Alex nodded. “That actually makes a lot of sense. And it was mostly stress talking. I had no idea what to think at first, and I had no idea how to change back. I, uh, would prefer to do it while you’re nearby until I’m sure I’ve got it figured out.”

“Of course,” Rory said warmly. “I’m happy to help as much as you need.”

They’d already explained to Alex’s mom that clothing stayed on the whole time during a shift, so she wouldn’t be worrying about *that*, at least.

“You’re sure it doesn’t hurt?” she asked anxiously. “How can it not hurt?”

Rory did the whole spiel that he’d done for Alex yesterday and demonstrated switching once again between human and bird form.

“I thought you said it wasn’t wise to shift frequently?” she asked.

She sounded mostly curious and a little as though she was still trying to reveal the lie in this whole thing. Given how much it had messed with her world view, Max couldn’t blame her.

Rory smiled at her. “It’s not a good idea when you’re new. But I’ve been doing this for quite some time, and I’m able to transform more easily.”

Max had never seen Rory hesitate between transforming into his bird or human form. It truly seemed second nature to him. But somehow, turning into a bird didn’t seem the same as turning into a 300-pound bear. Was that size-ist of Max?

Magic was so weird.

“You’re both welcome to come here if you want,” Rory said, then glanced at Max like he suddenly worried he shouldn’t have said that.

“The basement is a very safe area with no windows,” Max agreed immediately, “and I can cast spells that will ensure people don’t notice if that will make you feel better. We can even move the table out of the way first.”

Alex groaned. “Yes, please move the table first. I’m so glad you could fix it!”

“That’s very kind of you. Thank you.” Natalie still looked a bit stunned. “I, uh, need to think about everything.”

“Of course,” Rory said smoothly. “You’ve got our numbers, and you can text or call if you think of questions later. It’s totally normal to think of lots of questions once you’ve had time to consider everything.”

“Thank you.” She put an arm around Alex. “I think we’re going to head home now.”

They bundled back up into their coats and hats, and then they were heading off down the street.

Max blew out a breath. “Well, that’s a life-changing day.”

Rory nodded. “It really is. But I’m so glad we were here for them.”

Max shivered at the thought of what could have happened to Alex. Would the Great World Spell have tried to hide what was going on from their mother? From everyone? Could it have? Max didn’t like the idea of putting it to the test, and he was very relieved they wouldn’t have to.

It had made for a much more action-packed two days than Max had expected, though. And they still needed to open the store and work all day.

Maybe Max was starting to understand what Evie and Rory were saying about having actual time off. It was harder to work all the time when you were juggling so much. Max hadn’t expected any of this… but he wouldn’t change a thing if given a choice, either.

Rory smiled at him. “Time to get this show on the road?”

Yeah, it might be more chaotic, but it was so worth it.

The day passed with a steady stream of children and their parents, way busier than Sundays usually were for Max—except all his normal trends were slowly becoming less true thanks to the force of nature that was Rory. Somehow, when Max wasn’t looking, Rory had organized an entire Halloween book bingo sheet for children (and the occasional very enthusiastic adult), and today was the day to pick up that bingo sheet.

Participants had to read or complete a variety of Halloween-related activities, and when they crossed off lines or got a blackout, it impacted the prizes they would get next Saturday on Halloween. Rory had written on the sheet that the items were open to interpretation, and they just had to be able to explain their choices to him. He reiterated that to all the parents and children when he handed the sheets out. It was clear he wanted to make the game as fun and accessible as possible, and everyone responded to that. (Rory had gone to the thrift store, the dollar store, and the craft store for the prizes, and he’d wound up very happy but with a suspicious amount of glitter covering him.)

Alex had made Rory a bright orange shirt with eyes, a nose, and a mouth drawn like a jack-o'-lantern, and Rory seemed almost as excited about it as the children were. He listened without any impatience to their recitations of what they were wearing for Halloween—not always very clear—or what they were doing at school—not always very interesting—or what their pet was doing or their parents or their siblings. He accepted every person he encountered just the way they were. It was something that Max admired… and had zero desire to emulate. He was glad it made Rory and the recipient happy, though.

Max didn't even mind that he couldn't do as much spellreading. The store was busy enough that he came out to help Rory periodically, but Rory's enthusiasm counted for a lot. And it wasn't very long ago that Max would have had to be out here the whole time because there wasn't anyone else. Besides, cheerful kids who loved reading were probably Max's favorite humans overall.

This was a good thing, because a week later on Halloween, Max was dressed head-to-toe in black as the Dread Pirate Roberts, Rory was dressed as Princess Buttercup (in the red gown from her kidnapping), and Alex was dressed as Inigo Montoya (complete with fake mustache and boobs for a fabulous genderqueer version). They'd briefly considered Alex being Buttercup but decided not to risk worrying their mother, since Wesley and Buttercup were a couple. Inigo got to dance around with a sword, and Alex enjoyed that. Nōwē posed for one picture in a very fetching purple velvet onesie and crown as Prince Humperdink, but for some reason, she didn't want to keep wearing it.

Max still wasn't totally sure how he'd been suckered into doing all of this, except that Rory's joy was infectious, and he'd gone with a costume that he knew wouldn't upset Max. Plus, Rory made a very fetching Buttercup, and Max had to admit that the whole, "As you wish," thing was kind of fun.

Alex had convinced them all to carve pumpkins, which had actually been more fun than Max expected. To no one's surprise, Alex was the best at it. Rory was extremely enthusiastic, and Max took great pride in making his pumpkins look as grumpy as possible. His cutting skills didn't always align with the vision in his head, but he tried. All the pumpkins used battery-operated tea lights so that there was zero fire hazard.

They'd reorganized the boxes in the basement and draped them in colorful sheets and blankets, put up fairy lights, and filled the room with jack-o'-lanterns. The long table worked as seating for parents and those who wanted

to craft—because Rory and Alex had collaborated on several simple art projects the kids could do—and a whole bunch of pillows and cushions made up the new reading corner where Princess Buttercup was doing story hour before inspecting bingo cards and doling out candy and prizes.

Rory had several different stories to read, including excerpts from *The Princess Bride*—that included Alex and Max having a duel. The kids screeched with glee as Max-as-Wesley defeated Alex-as-Inigo.

(Max and Alex were definitely not technically skilled, but they did their best to make up for it with enthusiasm. Max couldn't believe he was saying that.)

Nōwē couldn't seem to decide if this was the coolest thing ever or the worst invasion of her space that had ever occurred. (Max agreed, to be honest.) But she was smart and fast, so Max trusted her to sneak away any time she needed to get away from everyone—or go high, so she could survey her empire like the queen she was.

They'd found all the copies of *The Princess Bride* they had, as well as other good fantasy choices. The kids—dressed in a variety of costumes that ranged from minimal effort to elaborate home sewn—were so excited to show Rory what they'd completed on their bingo cards, and Max watched Rory take such a broad interpretation of the cards sometimes that David and his rule-following D&D brain was probably getting shivers without knowing why.

Tom had wound up with a conflict for D&D, so they'd postponed yesterday's game, which was just as well, because they'd had plenty of prep to do for Halloween in the bookshop. They'd meet instead for D&D on the 2nd—and dress up, because it would obviously have crushed Rory if they didn't. Max had a sneaking suspicion that costumes were going to become a more regular part of their campaign, and he couldn't quite decide how terrible that was.

Alex had also expressed interest in joining, so Max had cleared it with the group and Alex's mom. Natalie didn't love the late night on a Monday, but since it was usually a Friday, she'd accepted it. She'd told Max that Alex often seemed to get along better with adults than with their peers, and now with the added magic… She was worried about them. She didn't want them to be isolated.

Max had assured her this group was all human, and while there was nothing to worry about, Max and Rory would of course take care of Alex.

But right now, all they were thinking about was Halloween and children who were dressed up and had already consumed too much sugar. The three of

them tried to take turns with at least one of them upstairs, but there was more than one occasion where they were all downstairs, like when Max and Alex were dueling. Max had cast spells to discourage theft, there was no way anyone could get into the back room with all the wards he had up, and he was just hoping for the best. (The tiny bathroom had never been used this frequently before. Max was hoping that the older plumbing held up and planning to use industrial-strength cleaning solutions on the entire room afterwards.)

If they did events like this in the future, he should probably look at his staffing model again. Maybe he could find someone who was willing to pick up part-time shifts here and there… He'd have to think about all of it.

For now, the important thing was that there were a bunch of kids who thought that books were the coolest thing in the universe. Rory was fabulous at reading stories to kids, and if Max said so himself, he and Alex were pretty good at semi-improvised sword fights.

Max was learning a lot about himself these days.

They kept the store open until eight to keep giving out candy—Max noticed that a non-zero quantity also ended up in Rory's mouth—although the number of kids slowed down as parents and children headed off to heavily residential areas to get as much candy as possible. Max didn't blame them. He remembered trick or treating with Evie and his parents when he was young. Figuring out the neighbors who gave out loot bags with multiple items was always the way to go.

Since Alex still wasn't allowed to work past seven, they were volunteering for that hour, and Max happened to be gifting them with an amount equal to their hourly wage in cash. (Their mom had said it was okay, under these special circumstances. She liked all the creative stuff Alex got to do here, and she was especially grateful now for the time Alex got to spend with people who were mixed up in "their magical world," as she was now calling it.)

Alex and Rory made sure that lots of photos were taken, and Max sent a few of them along to Evie when there was a brief lull a little after seven. (Rory had even taken a video of one of Alex and Max's duels.)

MAX

You'll never guess the day I had.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

[entire row of laughing emojis] ARE YOU A POD PERSON, WHAT IS GOING ON???

MAX

Ha ha. You're so funny.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

I am a DELIGHT.

Seriously, though: I told you you should look into hiring someone. You see what happens when you listen to your sister?

MAX

Lies. All lies.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

That's right. I'm always right. You should really have accepted that by now.

Look what Adam made!

What followed was a mouth-watering array of cakes and cookies that were all Halloween themed, including ghosts, witches, pumpkins, black cats, mummies, vampires, brooms, witches' hats and more. There was even an entire cake crafted to look exactly like a jack-o'-lantern.

Rory peered over Max's shoulder.

"Ooh, we can go visit your sister, can't we?"

Max laughed. "Thinking with your stomach?"

Shrugging, Rory offered Max a grin. "Can't deny how good that all looks."

"Not quite ready to leave for long enough to visit California, but I'm considering options. So maybe eventually, okay?"

Rory nodded, accepting this easily. He was one of the most low-pressure people Max had ever met, and Max was never left with the feeling that Rory was conceding because he felt like he had to, or that he would be left upset or resentful.

It made Max more determined to figure out how to make it happen. Definitely not this year, but maybe after Evie's visit, he could look into managing something for the summer?

MAX

Those look delicious. Rory wants to eat them all.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

We don't ship across the country.

MAX

Maybe we could come visit sometime next year. Late summer or autumn, maybe?

His phone rang. It was Evie. He answered. "Hello?"

"Seriously, is this a pod person impersonating my brother?" Evie demanded. "I didn't mean it before, but now it's an actual question."

"I mean, whether I was or not, I'd still tell you no. Obviously," Max drawled.

"Seriously!" Evie repeated, sounding worked up. "*Come visit?* You've scarcely left the bookshop in years, never mind the *state*."

"I'm not that bad," Max told her, rolling his eyes.

"You are *absolutely* that bad," she argued. "You are the poster boy for not leaving home."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm a terrible brother," Max grumbled.

She sucked in a breath and protested immediately, "I didn't say that! Max, you're my favorite brother."

This surprised a laugh out of him, though he said dryly, "Thanks for that."

He could tell that she was grinning now. So was Rory.

"I'd love it if you felt comfortable enough to come out here for a visit at some point," she told him. "I'll save all the dessert for Rory."

"Thank you!" Rory called.

Max didn't have the phone on speaker, but it was clear his shifter hearing was picking everything up anyway.

"I can't wait to meet him!" Evie said in the tone of voice that meant Rory was going to be subjected to a lot of questioning. Max was pretty sure there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Rory was beaming like this was a great thing, and Max was just going to… let them figure it out.

"He looks forward to meeting you, too," Max said.

"And you and *I* are going to talk later," Evie promised.

Yeah, he definitely had his own questioning to undergo. He objected on principle, except that the idea of needing to talk a lot about Rory wasn't nearly as alarming as anything else would have been.

"Yeah, yeah," he told her. "I have to go. We're wrapping everything up soon, and we have to make sure Alex gets home safely."

Alex rolled their eyes, and sure, it was only going to be a little after eight, but people could get out of hand on Halloween, and there was no way Max was going to risk anything happening to Alex.

They had one more story time, gave out yet more candy, and then it was finally time to wrap up for the night. They escorted out the stragglers—Rory made sure they had an extra helping of candy—and then walked Alex home. There were still a lot of costumed people out, and it was kind of nice to see the normal order of the world suspended for a few hours. People could (mostly) dress however they wanted, let their silly side out, and ask strangers for candy.

They got stopped three times for pictures and once for a duel, but then they successfully delivered Alex safely home. Then they made their way back to the shop. Rory had requested they leave the bulk of the Halloween decorations up on Sunday and Monday so that it would still be in effect for D&D, and then they'd start taking them down on Tuesday and just leave a few touches for fall.

(At that point, they were going to start "ramping up for Thanksgiving." Apparently, Rory had a plan. Max didn't want to know.)

He and Rory strolled back to the book shop, continuing to admire all the decorations around them and the costumes of the people they passed.

When Max uncertainly brushed his hand against Rory's, he immediately twined their fingers together, and Max relaxed, soothed by the point of connection more than he'd thought he would be.

"Thank you for this," he said sincerely. "I would never have done any of this on my own. And if you'd asked, I'd probably have told you it was all completely unnecessary. I can't imagine doing it all the time, but it was pretty amazing to do with you—or, you know, pose where you told me to pose."

Rory grinned at him, honey eyes bright even as they passed between the street lights.

“I had so much fun! And I have so many ideas for more things we can do.”

Max had a feeling his quiet existence was gone for good… and he minded far less than he’d thought he would. Plus, he knew there’d still be quiet evenings in the back room, and Rory was still going to curl up with him so they could read in bed at night.

Max was gaining so much, mostly things he hadn’t known he wanted—or maybe hadn’t wanted until Rory.

“I’m glad,” Max said impulsively. “I’m really glad you’re here.”

Rory’s smile got impossibly wider. “I’m so glad to be here! You’re the best!”

“I’m really not,” Max told him. “But I’m glad you think so.”

“You’re the best for *me*,” Rory argued stubbornly.

Max had the feeling he wasn’t going to be able to change Rory’s mind about this. Rory had seen Max before coffee and annoyed with customers and white-knuckle driving and arguing with his cat. Really, he probably knew Max better than just about anyone (which might say more about Max’s life than anything, but the point remained).

“I think you’re the best for me, too,” Max told him quietly. “This isn’t at all what I expected.”

“What did you expect?” Rory asked curiously.

“To be the grumpy cat man who dies and gets found days later after cats have eaten his eyeballs.”

Rory snorted a laugh. “Ah, okay. Well, I’m glad to know I rate better than getting your eyeballs eaten.”

“So much better,” Max assured him, making him laugh more.

Max couldn’t remember this much laughter in a long time.

Back at the bookshop, they once again made sure everything was locked up and turned off, then headed upstairs with a disgruntled Nōwē.

“It’s not going to be like this every day,” Rory told her. “We just like to celebrate various holidays. And you know, the more customers we have, the more you’re assured of the fancy food.”

Nōwē lashed her tail and only tried to trip them twice while going up the stairs, which was basically a declaration of love. Back in the apartment, they changed out of their costumes. Max definitely wouldn’t want to wear it every day. The shirt, pants, and boots actually hadn’t been that bad, but the mask, bandanna, and gloves had gotten tiresome. Rory had even convinced him to cast a spell to give himself a little mustache. He was *so glad* to get rid of it again. It hadn’t been as bad as Alex’s, but still.

Showering left him feeling totally like Max again. Rory had insisted that Max use the bathroom first, which meant that Max was comfortably in his pajamas when Rory emerged in a puff of steam. (Max had learned that Rory liked his showers very hot, and he'd found a spell that ensured their water heater could keep up with the demand.)

His hair was dry, once again a flyaway halo around his head. Max hadn't even noticed the sound of the blow dryer, but he was exhausted, and his mind was wandering. The day had been entirely successful, but it had been a lot of people. Rory was already wearing his own pajamas, because he'd taken his into the bathroom to change, like he always did if he went in after Max.

Max found it difficult to explain how appealing he found the man. He'd been aware that he was pretty before, in a very uninterested sort of way, more the way that he could see women were aesthetically pleasing or that puppies were cute. There was no *attraction* there. Only now there was. (With Rory, obviously, not with the women or the puppies.)

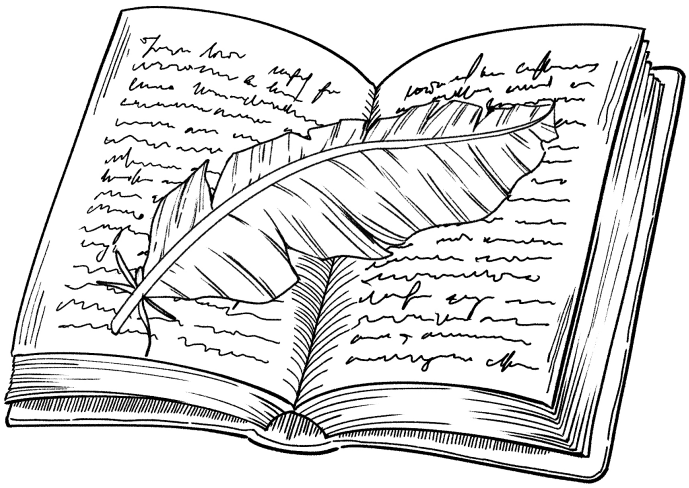
Now, Max was filled with a desire to run his fingers through that feathery blond hair. He wanted those molten eyes watching him, and he had *thoughts* about Rory's mobile mouth. Rory was kind and bright and *beautiful*. And he never pushed Max.

And maybe it was that which gave Max the courage to step up to him and cup Rory's face in his hands.

Rory looked surprised but open, as he always was, just waiting for Max.

"May I kiss you?" Max asked.

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Chapter Sixteen

Rory

Oh. Rory hadn't expected this. He looked up at Max's face. His gaze was dark and intent.

"Would you like to?" Rory asked carefully.

Max's mouth tipped up faintly. "Very much so."

"Then you most definitely may."

Rory held himself very still, not wanting to break the moment. His mate wanted to kiss him!

Max leaned down and pressed his lips to Rory's, soft and a little tentative. Rory's stomach erupted in butterflies, and he felt heat down to his toes. Oh, wow. His eyes fluttered closed, and his hands moved without his conscious volition, landing on Max's hips. Thankfully, Max didn't seem to mind.

They kissed for several long, languorous moments, until a stray movement brushed the two of them together, and Rory could feel Max's arousal hard against him.

Max broke the kiss, breathing heavily, and leaned his forehead against Rory's.

"I never really got the point of kissing before," Max admitted quietly.

Rory couldn't help but smile. "Does it feel different now?"

Max made a humming noise of agreement. "I really wasn't attracted to anyone before. So it just didn't work. I assumed I was ace."

Rory pulled back a little, hands still on Max's hips, so that he could meet Max's gaze.

"And you don't think so anymore?" he asked carefully.

"I think I must be demi," Max said, shrugging, looking a bit bemused by the whole thing. "I've never been attracted to someone up until now—but I've also never had someone stick around like you have. You got to know me, and I got to know you in a way that I've never attempted before. I didn't find you attractive until suddenly I did." His eyes widened. "Wait. Is that rude?"

Rory laughed. "No, not at all. However you react is okay. Society often seems to be hyper-sexualized, but you don't owe anybody attraction or arousal."

Max smiled softly at him. "Thanks. That's true. It's, uh, all a bit new for me."

"That's totally alright," Rory assured him. "Like I said, however you react or feel is okay. And just because you're feeling some attraction doesn't mean you have to do anything about it. Or you can want to do something about it until you *don't* want to do something about it. All of that is totally fine."

Tension that Rory hadn't even realized Max had been holding visibly left his frame.

Rory leaned closer and wrapped his arms around Max's waist in a hug.

"It's all fine," Rory reiterated. "Wanting, not wanting, thinking you want until you figure out you don't. I care about you independent of all of that."

Max's arms encircled him, holding him in a firm embrace. "Thank you. I'm sure I'll get all muddled up about it again at some point, but it means a lot to me that you're clarifying all of this now."

Rory tucked his head into the juncture of Max's neck and shoulder, rubbing the side of his head there, which made Max laugh.

"Is that what Red's been doing all this time?" he asked.

Rory grinned against his skin. "Obviously."

Max twisted a little and pressed a kiss to Rory's hair.

"You want to get in bed and read books?" Rory asked.

Max's shoulders shook with laughter. "I really do. Thank you."

Yeah, Rory had been pretty sure that jumping into bed for anything more would be moving way too fast. Rory didn't ever want Max to feel uncomfortable.

So they headed into the bedroom together and climbed into bed, getting their books out.

"I think I need to reread *The Princess Bride*," Rory told him.

This made Max laugh. "It's on your mind for some reason? Did you want to watch the movie together?"

Rory grinned. "Yes, I'd love to!"

"Tomorrow night?"

"Sounds perfect," Rory agreed.

They settled in to read. He'd just started a series of fall romances. He had one more spooky romance after this one, and then he'd be switching to the Thanksgiving-themed ones. Max didn't read seasonally, apparently.

Max started yawning pretty early on, and it wasn't long before he set his book aside on the bedside table. Rory immediately moved to set his down, too.

"You can keep reading if you want," Max offered immediately.

"Nah," Rory demurred. "I'm good. It was a long day."

Rory was pretty sure that, unlike Max, he could do this practically every day, but it could still be tiring.

Rory flicked out the light, and they both settled under the covers.

"Thanks," Max said quietly, the words soft in the darkness. "I'm glad to be here with you."

Smiling, Rory told him, "I'm glad to be here with you, too."



Sunday was normally a quiet day, and it was extra quiet in comparison to Saturday's extravagance. Max and Rory worked out in the morning—Max completing his rather boring run on the treadmill and Rory having found a weird and awesome workout called *Jazzercise*!—and then Max spent about an hour working on spell requests before eleven rolled around.

Although Rory insisted he could handle it, Max was up front for opening, and they roamed the aisles and made sure they hadn’t missed anything last night. Although most of the activities had been in the basement, there had been a lot of kids running amok, and they found candy here and there and a few shelves that were disarranged, but nothing too terrible.

Rory was a big fan of the festive atmosphere. He doubted Max would go for a theme *every* month, but Rory was pretty sure he could come up with at least a small way they could celebrate all the time. It made everything brighter and gave people something to look forward to when they came in.

Also fun—so fun!—was the fact that Max liked kisses now, and he would occasionally drop one on Rory’s lips for no discernible reason. Rory was a big fan of this (for as long as Max wanted to do it, of course). He liked the affection, and he was glad to know that Max felt this at ease with him.

A few kids who hadn’t been able to make it in yesterday showed up today, and of course Rory took their bingo cards and gave them candy. Max rolled his eyes, but he didn’t object, and Rory even caught him giving out the treats a couple times. He also told off a rude man on the phone, informed a customer their taste in books was appalling, and scolded someone who went into the back corridor and was heading for the basement and not the bathroom. So the prickly exterior was definitely still intact.

They closed on time at five, spent a short period ensuring everything was tidied up again, fed Nōwē, and then made the questionable choice of eating popcorn for dinner and watching The Princess Bride immediately.

Rory liked being curled up next to Max on the couch, and he appreciated that Max could quote sections of the movie. He also texted his sister so that she could quote sections of the movie. Was this sibling magic?

Max laughed when he asked. Apparently, she just had favorite parts like her brother did.

Rory liked the whimsy of the book and film, how serious things happened amidst the silliness and people weren’t perfect, but good always triumphed in the end. (This was probably why he read a lot of romances, just like Tom from D&D.)

They ate a lot of popcorn, and Rory couldn’t stop smiling as the credits rolled—especially when Max seemed to think that the end of the movie meant they deserved kisses, too. Rory appreciated very much being sprawled out on the couch with Max’s warm weight on top of him, half propped up on his arms. Max ground down, making Rory moan into his

mouth. Max's cheeks were pink, his eyes dark, and his hair in disarray. His t-shirt was half rucked up, and Rory was very much enjoying touching the soft skin of his back.

Max moved again, and they both shuddered. Friction was an excellent force. Rory was a big fan.

"Is this okay?" Max asked.

"Super okay," Rory gasped out, "as long as you're into it."

"Mmm," Max hummed out a satisfied noise. "I was always confused when people talked about grinding. It seemed uncomfortable."

Rory huffed a breathless laugh, rolling his hips and enjoying the rush of sensations and the way Max made pretty sounds. "It definitely doesn't make sense if you don't find it pleasurable. Then it's just people rubbing against one another."

Max chuckled, leaning in to capture Rory's lips again. "Yeah, no thank you. But this… I didn't know I could *want* like this."

Rory sank into the kiss, reveling in the connection. He knew Max might not want to do this often, but he was definitely going to enjoy it anytime Max was interested.

Max's movements were more rhythmic now, chasing his pleasure against Rory's skin. Rory loved the feeling, both for the physical sensation and the knowledge that this was bringing Max pleasure.

"Mm," Rory hummed happily. "Do you like the way this feels?"

"So much," Max gasped out, face flushed, lips puffy, eyes bright. His eyelashes fluttered. "It's weird and awesome. The idea of doing this with anyone else is still kind of gross."

Rory tried not to laugh. "I'm glad it feels good with me. But we can stop at any time."

Rory hoped he wasn't belaboring that point too much. But this was pretty new to Max, and Rory didn't ever want to accidentally pressure him.

"Don't want to stop," Max told him, sucking in a sharp breath as his hips continued to move rhythmically against Rory, lighting up both their bodies.

"You don't have to stop," Rory assured him. "In fact, you can come if you want."

Almost like he'd been waiting to be sure that was okay, Max gasped again, body growing taut before he collapsed on top of Rory, who happily took his weight. His partner's pleasure would always be more important than his own.

But after a moment, Max nudged him. “C’mon.”

So Rory hooked a leg around him and rocked against that warm body. Desire burned through Rory, roaring higher and higher until his own release overwhelmed him.

They lay there for a few moments, their breath evening out, until Max spoke. “It gets a bit gross at this stage, doesn’t it?”

Rory laughed. “Yeah, coming in your pants has some down sides. Shall we get cleaned up?”

Max agreed with alacrity, and Rory insisted that Max use the bathroom first. A few minutes later, they switched places, and Rory cleaned up quickly, so he could get back out to Max and see how he was doing.

“Alright?” he asked, as soon as they were back in the living room together, settled side by side on the couch once more. “Honest reactions only, and nothing you say is going to hurt my feelings, I promise.”

Max’s expression went soft. “I can quite honestly say it was the most pleasurable sexual experience I’ve ever had.”

“But?” Rory prompted.

“There isn’t a but.”

“There’s always a but.”

Max rolled his eyes, but he looked amused, and his demeanor relaxed the more they bickered.

“I really enjoyed it.” He looked a little uncomfortable. “If I’m being perfectly honest, I haven’t had sex very often, and in the past, it was because I felt like I should, or I wanted to see what all the fuss was about—and I’d determined that all that fuss was about nothing.”

Rory only smiled. “It’s definitely not for everyone, despite what popular culture would have you believe.”

“I didn’t expect to like it with you—I mean,” Max hastened to clarify, “not until I was suddenly interested. I only did that because I was interested for the first time ever, really properly interested.”

“I’m glad,” Rory said, and then realized how that might sound. “I’m glad you didn’t do something just because you thought I wanted it.”

“Ace people can choose to have sex because their partner wants it,” Max pointed out, a bit of a challenge.

“True,” Rory agreed. “People make all sorts of decisions and compromises in a relationship, and it can be hard to navigate when interests don’t align—about anything, not just sex. But I want to be sure that you

know that I'd feel more comfortable not having sex than having sex because you feel like you should or because you only want to please me. That wouldn't actually please me, I promise."

Max regarded him seriously for a long moment, and then he nodded. "Yeah, that's fair. And I promise that I'll be honest about this. You've amply demonstrated since I've known you that you'd never push me to do anything I didn't want. And at least at this point, I really do think I'm demisexual. In the last week, I've been both attracted to you and aroused by you. That's the first time that's ever happened to me, but I've never let anyone get as close to me as you are, so it's only mostly embarrassing that it took until I'm nearly forty to figure this out."

"You're thirty-eight," Rory pointed out. "You still get to say you're in your thirties."

Laughing, Max said, "Thanks for splitting that hair. I really appreciate it."

Rory grinned at him. "I think a lot of society is structured around an arbitrary notion of 'standard behavior.' And people who fall within that standard probably find it easier to navigate than everyone else. But you don't have to know your gender identity from the moment you were born or your sexuality from childhood or puberty or your twenties. People are constantly learning and growing and maturing, and why wouldn't it make sense that those aspects of yourself could be growing, too?"

Max sighed. "Yeah, when you put it that way, it seems perfectly reasonable."

Rory laughed. "I know it's not always straightforward, but I promise that when it comes to me, at least, everything is open and accepting. If you enjoyed that and don't want to do it again for a week or a month or forever, that's okay. If you thought you liked it in the moment but once you've had time to think about it, you didn't like it after all, or you don't like how it makes you feel afterwards, that's okay, too. Whatever you're feeling is correct and valid."

Max was regarding him with an expression Rory couldn't quite identify, and then he said, "Mostly, I'm wondering why I didn't meet you ten or twenty years ago."

A shiver swept over Rory, and he felt his eyes tear up. He sniffed. "That's such a sweet thing to say. I've mostly been in the wrong place at the wrong time, just waiting to run into your bookshop window, I guess."

Max snorted. “Yeah, I suppose we each had our own stumbling way of getting here.”

Rory’s way had certainly been circuitous.

“The important thing is that we’re here now,” Rory said firmly. “And there’s nowhere I’d rather be.”

“Me, either,” Max agreed.

Rory wondered if this was close enough to Max accepting him as his mate that Rory could tell him everything. If he *should* tell him everything. Well, obviously, he should, but was this the right time? Was it enough? As soon as he considered it, he dismissed it. Of course tonight wasn’t the right time. This was a big change for Max in how he saw his sexual identity, and throwing something else at him would not be helpful. Plus, the last thing Rory wanted was for Max to think his interest or acceptance was contingent on sex.

No, it just sounded more and more like Max wanted Rory in his life, and that hopefully meant as his mate, and *that* meant it was almost time to tell Max everything… and hopefully not scare him off.

It had been a while since Rory had seen any of his fellow mythical shifters. He wondered if any of them had found their mates recently and if they’d had trouble navigating the secrecy versus honesty. How could anyone agree to be their mate without knowing the truth? But they were supposed to be their mate to find out the truth… Had someone proposed revising the plan yet? Was Rory working with an outdated model?

Rory would try to figure out how they could discuss that later, after he’d figured out how to talk to his mate.

They finished getting ready for bed and then climbed in together, a bit earlier than normal, but that just gave more reading time. Rory could tell that Max liked the proof that nothing major had changed just because they’d gotten off together on the couch. Rory was more than ready to show Max that he meant every word he’d said.

They read for about an hour and a half, and then Max set his book aside, so Rory did the same. Max seemed a little bit fidgety.

Rory asked, “Shall I be Red tonight?”

Max’s eyes flew to his, surprise and relief in them, so Rory knew he’d guessed right. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“Of course not,” Rory confirmed. “Red and Rory are both me, remember.”

“I know,” Max said. “It just… it doesn’t seem like we’re going backward?”

Rory raised an eyebrow. “You let me live with you the day we met. I don’t think we’re doing anything the standard way.”

Max huffed a laugh, his body relaxing. “Well, that’s true.”

“The important thing is that we’re comfortable. We’re still figuring out what we like and how we work together, and that’s going to continue to adjust as time goes by. You’re still an introvert who needs alone time to recharge and process things. A lot’s been going on, and it makes perfect sense that you’d like some time.”

“I don’t want you to think…” Max started, but he didn’t seem to know how to finish that sentence.

“I like that you like me as a cardinal,” Rory assured him. “I’m incredibly grateful that you took me in and have let me stay here. I want to make space for you whenever you need it, and I enjoy being a bird. I’m very happy to be Red whenever you need it. Or when I need it. I’m not ever going to stop being a bird.”

Max was smiling now. “Yes, I understand that. And I’m very fond of you as a bird.”

Rory really hoped he was going to *stay* fond once he knew everything.

“And sleeping as a bird is very cozy,” Rory assured him. “You can ponder as long as you need to ponder.”

“Okay. Thank you,” Max said, still sounding a little sheepish but mostly just relieved.

Rory shifted, the blankets falling down as they were no longer on top of his human legs. He fluttered up so that he could perch on Max’s shoulder and rub against his neck, and Max laughed and cuddled into him, gently stroking his feathers just the way Rory liked.

They stayed like that for a few minutes, and then Rory fluttered over to his little basket on the bedside table and curled up. (The box had disappeared one day weeks ago, and a nice wicker basket and soft little blanket had appeared.) It really was very comfy to sleep as a bird. Humans were weirdly designed.

There was the sound of shifting covers as Max arranged himself lying down in bed, and then it went silent for a moment.

“Goodnight, Red.”

Rory chirped his own goodnight and went to sleep.



The bookshop opened at ten every day except Sundays and Mondays, so he and Max had their routine pretty much down, but it wasn't quite as leisurely as the two days that opened at eleven. Plus, now they got to have kisses, too, which never failed to fill Rory with delight.

Max seemed relieved Rory really didn't mind being Red overnight, and Rory was equally happy that Max was still comfortable with their new level of intimacy. He would have gone back to no kisses without complaint if Max preferred, but a comfortable Max who liked to kiss him was the best.

The day passed quickly, and before Rory knew it, they were dressing up for D&D. Alex had gone home after their shift to get their costume. They would meet back here at eight with everyone else.

Rory had scoured the thrift store, hardware store, and craft store, got a lot of advice and assistance from Alex, and made a small number of strategic online purchases. It was hugely entertaining to see the fruits of his labor as Max emerged from the bedroom in a floor-length robe with giant stars and moons on it. It was one of those fabrics that shifted between two colors depending on the angle, sometimes sort of teal and sometimes red. Rory beamed.

Max looked very grumpy wearing his pointy wizard hat and holding a wand that Rory had glued a big star on the end of. (*Hot* glue, he'd discovered from Alex, could do *amazing* things.)

Rory had made sure to find some costume jewelry that could go round his neck, big and gaudy looking—and of course, since Max was a half-elf in the game, he had pointy ear caps to wear.

Rory grinned hugely when he saw Max. "You look fantastic!"

Max gave him a long-suffering look. "I look like the five-year-old vision of what a wizard is."

“Like I said, you look fantastic!”

Max rolled his eyes, but Rory could see his mouth trying to twitch with amusement.

“Meanwhile,” Max said, “you get to wear *that*.”

Rory was wearing a robe, too, but it was homespun-looking and in plain brown. He’d found a long piece of rope and tied it around his waist. He shrugged.

“I’m a human druid,” he pointed out. “You’re the one who created my character. We’re into simplicity and communing with nature. I mean, I’d be happy to wild shape into Red, but I don’t think that would go over well with this crowd.”

Max laughed outright. “It would be a fantastic effect, but not so great for the World Spell. Yeah, alright, let’s get this over with. And next time, you’re going to be the most outlandish character I can think of!”

Rory just grinned at this threat.

They headed downstairs, Nōwē weaving between their ankles, which was actually more dangerous in the robes they weren’t used to wearing. Max had hold of the banister in a white-knuckled grasp.

“Please let us survive another night,” Rory told her. “We have to open the door for our other friends, and you’ll get lots of pets.”

Nōwē bounded down the stairs to skitter out into the bookshop. Max and Rory therefore made it without tripping to their deaths, and they were soon letting everyone else in and exclaiming over their costumes. Each person looked amazing, and Rory was glad to see that they looked as healthy as they had when he’d seen them a little over a week ago.

“We have to take some photos in the bookshop!” Rory exclaimed. “It’ll be great promotion on social media.”

“We have social media?” Max asked.

“I’ve been showing him,” Alex said.

“Oh,” Max said, a bit blankly. “Well, as long as I don’t have to do it.”

Rory leaned in to kiss his cheek. “You totally don’t, you big grump.”

Max looked very satisfied with this.

Alex had also taught Rory how to set the timer on his phone for photos, so they were able to get all of them in a variety of shots around the shop.

Edward, their human rogue, was dressed in a velvet cloak, tan pants, and a flowing white shirt with a brocade vest. Tom’s dwarf cleric had a full-on wig and beard, robes similar but a little bit fancier than Rory’s, a large

medallion necklace, and an axe for fighting. Sam's fairy barbarian was dressed like an old-school fighter with a variety of weapons strapped on over pants and a tight top. Her wings were at least four feet wide and made of glittering mesh. She had battle make-up painted across her face and generally posed with her teeth bared and a sword in each hand.

David had gone all-in on his dragonborn bard. He'd found a hand-held harp somewhere that was slung over his shoulder (or pulled off to play during their photos), and his full costume make-up had been meticulously done to emulate bronze scales across his entire face and hands. He also had a cloak, a billowing shirt, and dark pants and boots.

Their newest addition was a subtly green-skinned tiefling. Like David, Alex had gone full make-up, but what really set them apart were the huge curling horns that projected out of the side of their head, their tail, and the boots that had been built up so that they looked like they ended in hooves. They also had a quiver of arrows over their shoulder and a sword and dagger at their belt.

And finally, their dungeon master had gone full-on, well, *dungeon master*. Stella had slicked back her hair and was wearing leather pants and a leather corset that was crisscrossed with all sorts of leather straps. She had a whip and a riding crop.

Nōwē even graced them with her presence a few times, making her officially their mascot in the photos (and obviously the scariest member of their party).

After they'd exclaimed at length over one another's costumes—Alex had made the horns with chicken wire and papier-mâché, apparently—and taken pictures upstairs, they trooped down to the basement, set up, and took more photos as they rolled dice and moved mini-figs. They looked fantastic against the Halloween backdrop, and honestly, even if they never used any of the photos for promotion—though Rory intended to do that—just having the memories made him happy.

He *could* see why it might be a bit much for every session, but it was a lot of fun for a special occasion.

Once they settled down to play, they seemed to be in character for a lot more of this session, perhaps because they were literally sitting there *in character*. Even Tom and Max, who normally did the least in-character acting, got into it a little more. (It made the flirting between David and Tom way more obvious, Tom blushed even more—even with the beard—and

Rory really hoped they were going to figure out or admit they liked one another in real life and do something about it.)

Rory wasn't even sure how Edward had convinced the group that their bard and their cleric needed to dance as a distraction. (As the bard, shouldn't David be playing the music?) But somehow, he'd pulled it off, and even more impressively, he'd somehow conned David and Tom into *actually dancing*. There was room in the basement, and it was probably a terrible distraction for people who weren't as invested in this romance as their group was, but Stella was rolling with it, proving that she was invested in them as much as their story. (And maybe the guards they were trying to distract were romantics at heart. Rory shouldn't stereotype the NPCs.)

Collectively, they were trying not to be too obvious about their glee about the whole thing, like that might scare off the two of them. Rory had originally planned to wild shape to try to distract the guards, but this was clearly way better.

Stella seemed to think so, too, because the guards were distracted enough for the rest of the group to sneak past while David and Tom chatted with them and gave dance step suggestions.

Rory liked it better when they were all together in the campaign, but sometimes, that wasn't possible, and Stella split the turns between the two groups. Sam, Max, Edward, Rory, and Alex snuck deeper into the castle as David pulled out his harp and started to play music for the guards while Tom engaged in a very serious discussion of how they should reconcile joy with their duty to their gods.

"Are they still going to be giving live demos out there when we try to leave?" Rory asked.

Max shrugged. "It looks like it."

Only then Edward tried to steal a small vase in a hallway that he was sure no one would notice, and suddenly, magical alarms were going off, and the entire castle was on high alert. Those inside the castle ran for their lives—while outside, Tom calmly bid the guards perform their duty and please their gods.

Everyone else exchanged glances as the guards ran off to see what was going on, leaving David and Tom unharmed.

David grinned at Tom. "And I thought I had a smooth tongue."

Tom flushed to the roots of his hair, but he looked pleased.

"I—" Edward started.

“You’re not there,” Stella interrupted.

“But—” he tried.

“Nope,” Stella said firmly. “You’re still running for your life because you’ve got grabby hands.”

Rory wild shaped into a small bird—neutral colors, one that blended in with the stone—so he could scope things out. Sam was ready to rage, Max was very grumpily preparing spells, and Alex had an arrow cocked.

And then there was a thump from upstairs and what sounded like a cascade of books falling over.

Max looked up at the ceiling. “Dammit, Nōwē! You know better than to knock over the books!” He rose to his feet. “Let me go make sure she’s okay.”

“We’re about to roll for initiative,” Stella warned him, looking especially stern dressed up like this.

Max waved this aside. “Put me at the end. Or have Rory roll for me. I’ll be right back.”

They all started rolling. Rory was fascinated by battle because rounds took so long in real life compared to the seconds that they were in battle time. He was still getting the hang of actions and reactions and attacks of opportunity—and trying to remember he could use his movement at the end of a turn not just the beginning. Bonus actions, he’d learned, were the coolest. And some people had two or more attacks!

He was glad that he was here in real life time and actually got to ponder what he wanted to do, because there was no way he could figure out all the mechanics and actions fast enough to be useful.

“Okay,” Stella began, grinning at them. “Up first—”

The wrench was so sudden that Rory cried out, shoving to his feet and knocking the table even as he felt lifespans being altered. *Max*’s lifespan was being altered.

“Max!” he cried out even as he bolted for the stairs.

The other players were shouting at him, but Rory didn’t pay them any mind, just dashed frantically upstairs, hearing the thunder of everyone coming after him. He burst out of the stairwell and found Max on the ground in the hallway, half in the back hall and half in the front bookshop, hands wrapped around a knife that looked like it was perilously close to his heart.

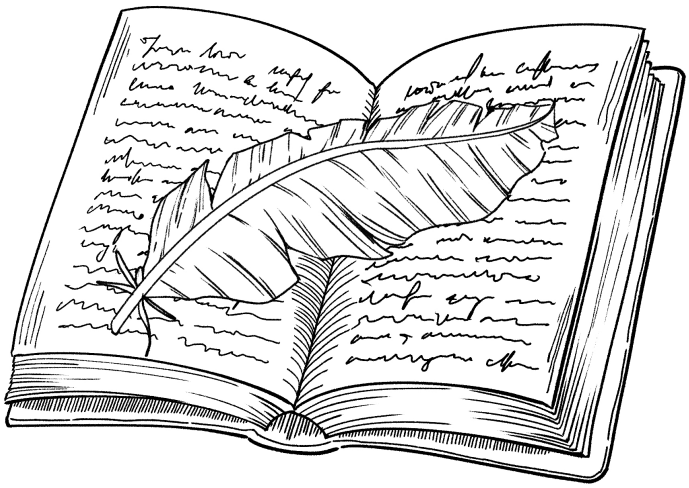
There was the screech of a cat, followed by a curse and movement in the bookshop.

“Stop them!” Rory yelled as he skidded to his knees at Max’s side.

A lot of things happened at once. Max’s hazy dark eyes met Rory’s, and he tried to smile. There was the roar of an enraged bear. A buzz of magic that wasn’t Max’s suddenly whispered across Rory’s skin, and he caught a glimpse of a magic spell out of the corner of his eye even as a shield rippled over the door.

Rory ignored all of it. He yanked out the knife, letting it clatter to the ground even as he burst into flames.

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Chapter Seventeen

Max

Max woke to the sound of yelling.

"We have to call 911!"

"We can't call 911!"

"We have to get paramedics for Max! And we need firefighters for the bookshop! And we need the police for the robber!"

Fire? What?

"Use some common sense! Do you think the normal emergency response can deal with any of this?"

"What do you mean the normal emergency response? Who the hell are you people? What the hell is going on?"

Max felt weirdly spacey, but that sounded like a frantic Tom, and Max didn't like that. Had someone said *normal* emergency response? Oh, no, who'd let the magic spell out of the bag? Alex was young and new to this, but that hadn't sounded like them, had it? It had sounded more like David, but David was human…

Tom's voice sounded even more hysterical as he shrieked, "Max is literally on fire!"

He was *what*?

Max opened his eyes, realizing that made it way easier to figure out what was going on. He blinked up at the ceiling. He didn't see the ceiling of his bookshop at this angle very often. He wondered if it was always improved

by being seen through flames. That had to get some points for being unusual, right? He wasn't *on* fire, he was just… surrounded by flames? Nice flames that weren't burning him and didn't seem to be burning any of his books or bookshop?

There was part of him that thought he should be way more stressed about all of this, but somehow, none of it seemed the least bit alarming. In fact, it felt a bit like he was on the mellowest trip ever. (He'd only tried weed once in university, before he'd realized he had too many secrets he might give away when he wasn't in control of himself. But it had felt like a milder version of whatever it was he was experiencing right now.)

Tom still sounded panicked. "I don't even understand what happened to Rory, but maybe we can still save him. I'll call—Hey!"

Max assumed someone had grabbed Tom's phone, and then Max processed the rest of what Tom had said. He lurched to a sitting position.

"What happened to Rory? Is he alright?" he demanded.

Everyone exchanged glances, and a few things became belatedly apparent to Max. He was not only surrounded by magical fire that wasn't hurting him, it apparently hadn't been so kind to his clothes, and he was totally naked. Alex was on the bookshop side, and they were one hundred percent a bear right now. There was a body wearing a ski mask on the floor by the door, hopefully unconscious rather than dead, and the door had a shield on it that didn't come from Max… because there was another witch in the bookshop, and the buzz of magic that told Max he was in the presence of a witch or shifter wasn't just coming from Alex, it was coming from… David?

Max swiveled to look at him. "How did you hide that you're a witch? Why?"

David held up a necklace that had been tucked in his shirt. Max vaguely remembered catching glimpses of the cord around his neck from time to time.

"Blocker," David said flatly.

Max's eyebrows rose. Those were regulated, took a lot of magic to make, and were *expensive*.

He eyed the rest of the group. He pointed at Tom. "Okay, Tom is panicking because his entire world view has just been upended. Why are the rest of you so calm?"

Stella sighed. “My mom’s a witch. Dad’s a normal person. I came out normal.”

“I’m with her,” Sam said with a shrug. “It took three years before she told me the truth, and family gatherings started to make a lot more sense.”

Edward looked surprised, but he said, “Shifter dud. My parents were both shifters, but they got stuck with me.”

Max was pretty sure that actually explained a lot about Edward, but he was going to consider that more seriously later.

The fire around Max was starting to die down. He watched the flames flicker with absentminded interest for a moment and then recalled the conversation at hand.

“Alex is a bear shifter,” Max said, waving at Alex, though that was probably pretty obvious given that they were, in fact, a bear right now. “They found out about a week ago. Rory is a bird shifter. Where is he?”

Max was sure he remembered Rory’s face swimming into view amidst what turned out to be quite a lot of pain from being stabbed in the chest. He looked down at himself, reminded anew that he was naked, but he was also… wound-free? The flames had all but flickered out now. Could he have hallucinated being stabbed by a masked intruder?

He looked over at the intruder again, still lying unconscious in the bookshop. He was pretty sure that wasn’t a hallucination. Or was he still in the midst of the world’s most elaborate dream? Had he fallen and hit his head? Was he concussed?

They all exchanged glances again, and Max felt his temper spiking, finally disturbing a bit of his epic calm.

“It’s not a difficult question,” Max said sternly. “Where is he?”

There was silence for a long moment, and eventually, it was David who swallowed visibly and finally said, “He, uh, he pulled the knife out of your chest and burst into flames.”

Max stared at him. David stared back, and the rest of the group gazed solemnly at him.

“He… burst into flames,” Max repeated blankly, unable to process the words.

There was a weird feeling in his belly. The last thing he’d seen was Rory and his molten gold eyes… right before he’d woken up covered in flames and miraculously healed.

They all nodded, and Max recognized the stricken looks now. Even Tom was quiet, perhaps having reached weirdness overload. Edward pulled off his cloak and offered it to Max, who used it to cover himself. Weirdly, he wasn't cold at all, despite the fact that he kept the temperature in the bookstore a bit cooler at night. He felt weirdly… cozy.

Nōwē suddenly let out a loud meow, startling all of them. She was very focused on… dust floating through the air? Max blinked, confused, because his cleaning spells usually kept the bookshop dust free. And was the dust… moving? As it began to swirl together in a little pile next to Max, it became entirely obvious that it was not behaving like normal. It was more like a little whirlwind of dust, and Max was entirely certain that dust didn't normally behave anything like that. Nōwē was watching it intently and continued to meow at it.

Was dust normally so… visible? Sure, Max had visited locations that had dust on visible surfaces, but it usually appeared white. This was dark, kind of gray, and… ashy?

Max's gorge rose as the thought hit him square in the chest, further shaking his calm. "Oh, my god, are those Rory's *ashes*?"

Everyone was staring in equal parts horror and fascination as the dust—ash—continued to swirl together, faster and faster.

Max glared at David, who raised his hands and said hastily, "This is not me!"

"Well, it's sure as shit not me," Max snarled, "and last time I checked, ashes can't do this."

"Shifters also don't burst into flames, nor do wounds heal as though they never happened," David snapped back. "Max, you got *stabbed in the chest*, and there isn't a mark on you."

Yeah, that was… that was something Max wasn't going to think about right now. Already, he could feel himself calming down again, a weird certainty filling him that it was going to be alright. It made no sense, but he didn't suppose anything about this did.

"You swear you're not doing this?" he demanded.

"I swear," David responded solemnly. "I pulled the charm off at the same time Alex shifted. Rory yelled for us to stop the intruder, and we both, uh, reacted."

Alex popped into Max's line of sight again, big and hulking and furry.

"Why are they still a bear?" Edward wanted to know.

“They shifted for the first time last week,” Max explained. “That’s how they found out they’re a shifter.”

“Shit,” Edward muttered.

“Rory’s helping them with their shift, and we agreed that they should rest up before they attempted to shift again,” Max added.

“Yeah, geez, okay.” Edward groaned. “Look, I might not be able to shift myself, but I grew up with shifters, and I probably know all the spiels better than they do at this point. Alex, you want me to walk you through shifting back again?”

Alex let out a mournful noise and nodded their head.

“No problem,” Edward said, stepping carefully around Max and moving into the bookshop.

He drew Alex off a bit and started talking quietly to them.

The rest of them were still staring at the rotating ash cloud.

“You want to tell us why you were pretending not to be a witch?” Max asked. He pointed to where David was still holding the necklace. “Because I know the rules around those and how much they cost.”

David huffed out a breath. “Of course you do.” He cleared his throat. “Uh, so you’re not going to like it.”

Max blew out a breath. Given that he was the only witch in the group, it had been a distinct possibility, although, “it has nothing to do with you or the bookshop,” would have been his preferred response.

“And *why* were you investigating me?” Max wanted to know.

Stella whirled on David. “*That*’s why you proposed the bookshop for our games?”

That actually made a lot of sense, now that Max thought about it. He’d figured she was an immovable mountain, but it hadn’t really been clear why she’d picked the bookshop as her location of choice.

David blew out a breath. “I am already going to get in so much shit for this, so screw it. Yes, that’s why I suggested the bookshop. I really do live here, and I really do like D&D. And all of you.”

Stella’s tone was acid. “You were just hiding who you really were.”

Tom’s voice was equally chilly. “It’s not like he was the only one.”

Stella and David both winced.

David said, “The Council got some complaints about you, Spellreader, and I was asked to investigate.”

“Fuck me,” Stella breathed. “You work for the Council.”

Edward suddenly popped through the doorway. “You work for the *Council*? What the fuck, man?”

David’s cheeks had gone pink. “I’m more like a freelance consultant, okay? It’s a dangerous thing if a Spellreader is unreliable or corrupt, and there was more than one complaint.”

Fucking witches. Some days, Max didn’t know why he bothered.

“Am I still under investigation?” Max demanded.

David shook his head. “No, that’s been done for months. It became obvious quite quickly that you’re not very diplomatic but you’re entirely scrupulous in matters of reading spells. Your security is excellent, and there’s never been any evidence of you dealing in dangerous or illegal spells.”

“That’s because I don’t,” Max said flatly. “And what, you just decided to stick around?”

“Yes!” David snapped. “Like I said, I like you all! I live here. And I couldn’t very well suddenly appear to be a witch one day. It shouldn’t have mattered to any of the others, but what was I supposed to tell you, Max? Oh, hey, suddenly I’m a witch? Surprise!”

Max was still inclined to be rather salty about this, but it was true that David hadn’t needed to reveal what he could do just now. He’d done it to stop the intruder who’d nearly succeeded in killing Max—would have, he was pretty sure, were it not for Rory, but he still didn’t understand what the hell had happened.

And even if David *had* revealed himself, he could have claimed that he was in hiding or something like that. Or investigating someone else. Yes, he’d kept things from them, but as soon as he was called on it, he’d told them the truth—or at least, Max didn’t think he was still lying.

Stella’s eyes were suddenly narrowed into tiny slits. She looked *fierce*, especially given what she was wearing.

“And why did *we* meet, David?” she asked sharply. “Going to try to tell me it was a coincidence?”

“It was more than a decade ago,” David protested, clearly uncomfortable.

Stella didn’t relent. “And are you claiming you didn’t know I was a null witch?”

He sighed. “Sometimes null witches and shifters react poorly to their lack of magic.”

Stella was staring at him incredulously. “So you created a D&D group to keep an eye on us?”

“Okay, look, it was something you enjoyed playing, and it was an easy way to meet up with you periodically.” David sounded defensive. “Plus I *like* D&D. And all of you.”

Edward’s arms were crossed over his chest. “But you pulled me in so that you could make sure I wasn’t about to snap and tell all the normal people about shifters?”

Alex appeared in the doorway as well, thankfully human again. “Did you know I was a shifter?”

David shook his head. “I had no idea. I mean, not until you showed up today and I could feel that you had magic. I just assumed you were a witch or shifter that Max knew. No secret knowledge or anything like that. Like I said, I haven’t been investigating Max—or anyone—in months, and I was just here to play D&D.” He looked between them all. “I consider you my friends.”

“Friends you’ve been lying to every minute you’ve known us!” Tom snapped. “Along with everyone else here. Well, you know what? I don’t need more people in my life treating me like shit. I’m out of here.”

He marched over to the door even as the others began protesting—at which point, Tom realized he couldn’t get out, because the door had a shield over it.

“Let. Me. Out,” Tom ground out.

“Tom,” David protested. “If you’d just let me explain—”

Tom was vibrating with tension. “Let. Me. Out. Now.”

David looked back at Max, who nodded. They needed to deal with all of this, but Max didn’t think it would be helpful right now to make Tom feel like he was trapped in here with them. His world had just gone completely pear-shaped.

David lowered the shield, and Tom yanked the door open.

“Tom, you can’t—” David started again.

But Tom was already gone.

“Let me go talk to him,” Sam suggested, expression caught somewhere between sympathy and pain. “He’ll still be upset that I was hiding something from him, but at least I’m still a normal person like him.”

David’s face was twisted in lines of distress, his hands clenched at his sides, but he nodded stiffly.

Sam added, “I’ll make sure he knows he can’t tell anyone.” She grimaced. “Or if the World Spell has done its magic, I’ll let you know.”

This set off a round of grimaces from all of them. It was one thing for the Spell to sort of… gloss over things for the everyday person who saw something they shouldn’t have. Maybe from the outside, people would consider this to be the same thing, but Tom had been playing D&D with them for years. It didn’t feel like they could go back to playing if he didn’t remember everything he’d learned about them while they all knew the truth about one another…

Unfortunately, it was a possibility that they had to be prepared for. The Spell might smooth away the time from them getting upstairs until now. They had to interact all the time with normal people who didn’t know anything about them. Max had managed it just fine with the group up to this point. But it felt all kinds of weird now.

The dancing ash started to glow, so softly that Max wasn’t certain at first, but now it was bright enough that there was no mistaking it. The ash was giving off its own light. It felt warm, not physically, but like it was trying to reassure Max that everything was fine.

Max had clearly lost the plot a while back.

He looked at the group still clustered around him, marveling at the fact that so many of them were in the know about magic. If only they’d all been aware of the truth, they could have supported one another all this time. Instead, only David had known their statuses, and he’d carefully hidden everything because he was busy investigating people and then trying to pretend it had never happened.

Ugh. This was a total mess.

Sam hurried after Tom, and David stared out the door with bleak and desperate eyes, like he wanted nothing more than to chase after her.

“How much longer will the bad guy be unconscious?” Max wanted to know.

David sighed, his gaze moving from the door to the assailant. “I hit them with a professional-grade stunning spell. They’ll stay unconscious unless I lift the spell. The failsafe is twenty-four hours.”

Wow. Yeah, that was a strong spell. Well, at least they didn’t have to worry about the person waking up in the middle of this. That was really the only thing that could make this more ridiculous.

Being dressed as characters from D&D really added to the experience.

The ash was getting bright faster and faster now, until it flared so brilliant a white that Max was forced to close his eyes and cover them with his hands. When the glow finally died away, Max opened his eyes.

He sucked in a sharp breath, blinking a few times, his eyes filling with tears—because the ashes were gone, and in their place was a small bird. Unlike the cardinal, this bird was small because it was a baby. It was covered in pale orange fluff that officially made it the cutest thing Max had ever seen.

"Rory?" Max whispered.

The bird chirped happily. Stella whispered, "Oh, my god," and someone sniffled.

Max held out his hands, and the bird hopped into them, flapping his definitely-pre-flight stubby little wings a few times. Max brought the bird up to his face—where it practically fell out of Max's cupped hands as it eagerly leaned into his neck and cuddled against him.

Max blew out an unsteady breath, adjusting his grip so that the bird—Rory—could snuggle up against him just the way he usually did. The bird was warmer than normal, but given everything that they'd just witnessed, Max was going to assume that was normal. It was impossible to explain how that small, warm body pressed against him made him feel like everything was right with the world once more.

Max leveled each of the people around him with a glare. "Until Rory has a human mouth again and we know what he wants to do about all of us knowing about this, this absolutely did not happen." He snared David's gaze especially and promised, "You tell the Council about this, and you will find out about all the dangerous spells I lock away."

David huffed out a breath. "I'm a consultant, remember? And I'm not on a job right now. As far as I'm concerned, we had a very lively D&D session that got interrupted by an attempted robbery. Right?"

He looked around at everyone else, who exchanged glances and then nodded.

Stella already had her phone in her hand. (Where did she keep it in that outfit?)

"I'm texting Sam to let her know. She'll let Tom know."

"What are we going to do about the attacker?" David asked. He headed over and tugged the ski mask off.

"Let me see if I recognize them," Max requested.

Stella and Edward helped him stand up, since he was still holding Rory and wasn't totally sure if his feet would hold him. It was… good, really. He didn't feel bad at all, but it did seem a tiny bit like he and the world were out of sync somehow. Everything was slightly strange.

Edward helped him rearrange the cloak so that it was like a skirt wrapped around him. Entering the bookshop, he peered at the man.

He was white, scruffy, and pretty nondescript. Max shrugged. Not ringing any bells.

After a moment, Alex ventured, "I think he might have been in the shop a couple times. He drank some of the coffee and ate a couple cookies."

"Rude," Stella drawled.

They all laughed, maybe a bit more loudly than was really called for.

"Probably casing the joint," Max said, frowning down at him. "But even a cursory look would show that we don't have that many expensive books here. And we take very little cash. What was the point of breaking in?"

"I think we should let the normal police answer that," David suggested, gazing at the supine form with calculation in his eyes. "I'm not getting a magical buzz off him, and that means it's their problem."

Max gestured at everything. "But what about all of this?"

David eyed them all. Then he smiled. "Here's what we're going to do."

There was apparently a reason that David was a consultant with the Council. In short order, Max was dressed in his Dread Pirate Roberts outfit, Rory was hidden under a "do not notice" charm, and they'd placed a frantic call to the police to report the robbery.

David revived the thief just as the police arrived, taking on the duty of keeping him subdued with his hands pulled taut behind his back.

They showed the officers where the door of the building had been forced in the back, Alex explained how they thought they recognized the man, and Max explained how they'd moved their D&D session due to a conflict, but the store was usually quiet on Monday nights.

To Max's surprise, one of the police officers, a no-nonsense woman who looked to be in her forties and whose nametag read Rogers, gave off a magical buzz. As she took his statement, she mentioned that she'd known his parents, which made a lot of sense. He wondered if she'd come out deliberately.

When the man started raving about bears and fire and stabbing people who were now totally fine, the cops clearly didn't believe a word he said.

“It was just a job, you know?” the guy told them frantically. “I was getting some books that this guy’s family gave away to the bookstore and he wanted back. It was just a simple job. I didn’t sign up for this weird shit!”

“You can come with us and tell us all about it,” one of the cops said.

“Sure, sure,” the guy agreed. “Just get me out of here.”

Max and the others all agreed that they’d be available to give statements, but the guy was doing such a great job of incriminating himself that they hopefully wouldn’t have to do much. Max could only imagine how Alex’s mother was going to react to a B&E while they were here.

(On the other hand, Alex had amply demonstrated that they could take care of themself.)

Their cover-up meant the man wouldn’t be accused of attempted murder, but there was no way that Max was faking an injury and risking being sent to the hospital or being processed in a normal person facility of any kind.

Hopefully, the man would serve time for the breaking and entering.

Plus, thanks to the man’s rambling, Max was pretty sure he now knew who had caused this.

“There was a guy who called a lot because he wanted the books back from his dad’s place. As I explained to him at length, the books were legitimately sold or given to me by another family member. He can’t just claim them as his own. He was a total ass about it.”

“What’s so important about the books?” Rogers wanted to know.

“I have no idea,” Max said with a shrug. “I’m not sure which books are actually his. I don’t process all my intakes instantly. They’re normal people books, and it’s just not my first priority, you know?”

“Can you let me know if you find anything?” Rogers asked. “Especially if there’s anything special, you know?”

Max duly agreed, and Rogers headed off with the rest of the police to process their thief.

David, Stella, Edward, and Alex looked like they wanted answers right this second. Max couldn’t blame them, but it would take time to work out which books they were even talking about, and there was no way they were doing that now.

Alex’s stomach grumbled, and Max frowned. “Someone go grab Alex some snacks. And I need someone to walk them home.”

“I don’t—” Alex protested.

Max shot them a look. “And when your mom hears about this and then finds out that I just sent you walking home all on your own after eleven o’clock at night?”

Alex subsided, because there was no way *that* was a good idea, and they knew it.

“I can do it,” Edward offered.

Max nodded. “Please and thank you.”

“Let’s grab your stuff, and we can grab snacks at the same time,” Edward suggested.

Max felt almost totally back to normal, but he still headed down the stairs to the basement carefully, watching as the others straightened everything up. The thief had never been down here, so the police had only taken a cursory look before they’d concentrated on upstairs.

They righted fallen chairs and picked up everything that had been knocked off the table. They gathered up the leftover snacks, packed their bags, and then headed out, all of them with some sort of indication that they were glad Max was alright, and they hoped Rory fully recovered soon.

Rory chirped at all of them, which didn’t exactly give them solid information, but it seemed like he at least recognized his own name, which was good. Max had no idea if he was dealing with the equivalent of baby Rory, and it didn’t seem reasonable to try to quiz a bird. Not tonight, at least.

Rory had told him there’d been a fire before he’d been a cardinal for ten years, hadn’t he? Max wondered now if that was a normal part of life for him, if things always ended in a fire and this… rebirth? (He felt ridiculous just having the thought, but he didn’t know what else to call it.) He worried a little that it meant he was going to be stuck with a bird for the next decade, but if that was the case, then Max would get him the best bird accessories in existence and just wait until he took his human form again.

It was very quiet once everyone left. David had offered to cast better protection spells on the shop, and Max had explained how he *had* better spells, but he didn’t use them while there were normal people in the shop. He typically put them up only once the D&D crew was gone. Maybe it was time to look at some spells that were a little more nuanced.

Max made a mental note that he really would need to figure out which boxes the man had been trying to obtain and take a look at what they contained. This thief was clearly the middle man, and Max didn’t want that

rude man—assuming he was remembering the right person—to try again. It had been a close-enough thing today. If not for Rory, it was likely that Max would be dead right now. And while he was glad none of the others had come upstairs instead of him, he very much liked not being dead.

Not being dead meant he could spend a lot more time with Rory, and he liked that the most.

Max made sure all the spells were in full effect now that everyone else was gone, then he headed carefully upstairs, taking each step slowly and deliberately. Apparently Nōwē still thought he was in a bad way, because she didn't try to trip him even once.

He wondered if they were ever going to have a D&D session again. Was this the sort of thing that ended a group permanently?

He wasn't so sure that Tom was coming back, nor did he know how everyone felt about David. Max supposed that they could theoretically boot David out, but he'd been one of the founding members, and he was a big part of why they were there.

But how would they feel if Tom left? Ugh. Max didn't like any of this.

Once he reached the landing outside his apartment, he pressed his hand against the door and used his wards to let him in, like he had when he'd changed into the Dread Pirate Roberts costume. While Rory's magical fire hadn't harmed him, it had taken out everything Max had been wearing or had on his person. So he was short keys, phone, and clothes.

He was very grateful he'd set up his wards for just this sort of emergency. He usually used his keys to ensure he had them on him just in case of normal people, but a moment like this reinforced the reason to have back-up plans.

He also couldn't use his spare keys, because Rory had had those, and he suspected they'd burned like Max's things had.

Although Rory was a shifter, so there was a chance they'd shifted with him instead. Only… Rory hadn't really shifted. He'd burned to ash and been reborn. Somehow, Max didn't think keys came with that. But he wouldn't know that for sure until he could talk to Rory again—at which point it would no doubt become obvious if Rory was naked and possession-less.

Inside the apartment, Max sagged against the door as the whole day caught up with him. He had definitely not expected anything like the

excitement and danger of the night—or rather, he'd expected all of it to be fictional.

He might like plenty of action and adventure in the books he read or the D&D campaigns he played, but he really didn't need *any of it* in his actual life.

If he closed his eyes, he could remember what had happened, but it felt a little bit like it had happened to someone else, like Rory's mojo hadn't just healed his physical wounds. He remembered confusion and a pressure in his chest. He knew there'd been a red-hot wave of agony that nothing could have prepared him for… but it was gone to the dim recesses of his mind. He didn't really remember falling, though he must have. He'd been dazed, in so much pain, trying to figure out what was going on, and hoping that none of the others would be hurt. That *Rory* wouldn't be hurt.

And then Rory had been there, looking so concerned, golden eyes huge, and Max had tried to smile for him, and then…

Nothing, really, until Max had woken up feeling totally fine—certainly pain-free, naked as a jay bird, and *without* Rory. His second hand came up to cradle the little fluff ball who was nestled in against his neck and shoulder like it was the only place to be.

This was actually pretty normal for them… except for the part where Rory wasn't a cardinal and had formed out of *ash*.

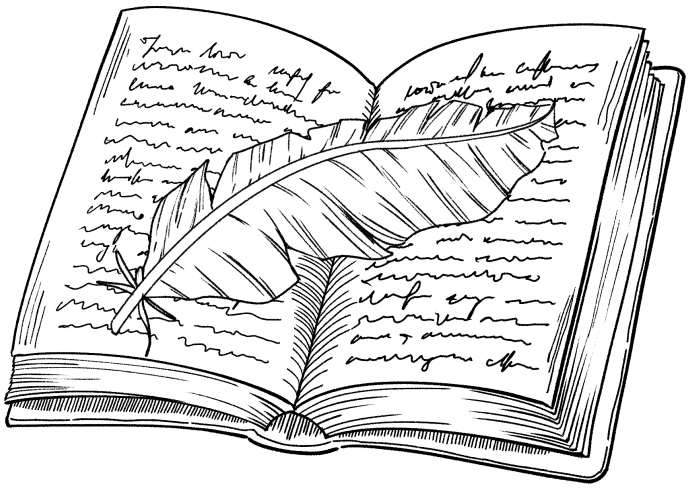
He scooped the bird into his hands and brought him up to his lips so he could press a soft kiss to all that fluff.

"I'm *so* glad you're alright," Max told him, voice rough. "Thank you for saving me."

Rory chirped at him.

Max really needed Rory to get his vocal cords back.

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Chapter Eighteen

Rory

Rory had never been reborn when he'd also found his mate. If he'd stopped to consider it, he wasn't sure that he would have expected anything to be different, not really. Ideally, his mate would actually be bonded to him, and he'd have told them everything first rather than accidentally demonstrating it in the most dramatic fashion possible. It was clearly too late for that.

But from the moment Rory had been reborn into his hatchling form, he'd known that his mate was there. Rory wasn't a baby, but he wasn't exactly his adult self, either. Everything that made him *him* was reforming, and it took a little while for that to happen, even with magic.

He was more mentally aware than either a baby bird *or* a baby human, but he wasn't fully grown yet. It was often quite disorienting, and there was a reason Rory stayed in bird form for a while.

But this time, when Rory had *become* once more, he'd realized in almost the same moment that his mate was right there. Rory hadn't remembered much of anything in those first few moments, but *mate* and *safety* were certainties. Cuddling up against his witch had been everything he'd ever wanted, and he'd spared a moment to wish every rebirth could be like this.

It was sometime in the wee hours of the morning, probably, when accompanied by the snores of his witch, Rory had remembered *Max* as a name and a more complete concept, had remembered the fact that he'd died

so that Max would live. He hopped up and down the whole bed, inspecting Max as best he could, even as he told himself that Max had carried him up to the apartment, that Max had got ready to sleep and climbed into bed and cuddled Rory, so he was totally fine.

Rory could see Max's lifeline again, and it was long, just like it was supposed to be, instead of that horrible rending that had occurred earlier.

Rory knew what he was capable of, knew that as a phoenix, he had a certain measure of control over death and life… but he still needed the visual reminder, needed to watch the rise and fall of Max's chest to be absolutely, one hundred percent certain that he was unharmed.

Rory would be forever grateful that he'd been able to protect Max, but he wouldn't complain if he never needed to do it again. Max needed to be safe. Rory would make sure that Max was safe.

(If Max was a little confused in the morning when he woke up and found that a small bird had surrounded him in pillows from head to foot, well, these things happened. Pillows were soft and protective. They were obviously a good idea. They had been very awkward to move when Rory was so small and couldn't fly yet, but he'd managed. Max was most important, after all.)

"Good morning, Rory," Max said, voice rough and sleepy-sounding.

Rory chirped at him, making Max smile. He reached out to scoop Rory up, pausing for a moment after he clasped his hands around him.

"You're bigger already. You don't fit in my hands the same way anymore," Max observed.

Rory trilled at him. That was right. He was growing all the time! How smart of his mate to see that.

"Okay," Max said, clearly thinking as he spoke, "so I'm going to assume for now that you're, uh, growing back to full size. And maybe when you're fully grown again, you'll be able to turn back into a human?"

Rory rubbed up against Max's hands and sang some more.

Max laughed. "Sounds good to me. I mean, it's all super weird, but we're just going to roll with it."

Max got ready for the day, letting Rory perch on the bathroom sink while he showered. Rory loved how warm and steamy the room got, and he trilled his happiness.

Once Max was dressed, he carried Rory out to the kitchen, where Nōwē was crying out that she needed food and she needed it right now.

“Cool your jets. I’m coming,” Max grumbled.

Nōwē didn’t think much of this excuse, and she waited impatiently until Max had set her filled food dish back down on the floor.

Max pulled out the bird seed for Rory. “Will this still work for you?”

Rory hopped over and pecked at the bag. Max smiled, gently nudged him away, and poured the seeds out onto a saucer.

“Do you need anything else?” Max asked. “You don’t know how relieved I am that you don’t need chewed up worms or something.”

Rory could agree that wouldn’t be ideal.

Max pondered for a moment, and then he scooped Rory up, away from the seeds.

“You chirp if you want to eat anything else, okay?”

Chirping in agreement, Rory let Max hold him out to various food items on the island, in the cupboard, and finally in the fridge. Rory liked bananas, apples, and oranges, so he’d indicated he wanted to eat those. Max seemed to think that was normal. The one that really puzzled him was the hot sauce.

He set Rory down on the island and held up the bottle. “Seriously?”

Rory trilled at him, fluttering his stubby little wings.

Max’s face expressed his doubt, but he said, “Okay. Do you want some on the seeds?”

Rory let out more happy sounds, glad his mate was so smart, and headed over to the saucer, then looked back at Max expectantly.

Still with a weird expression on his face, Max nevertheless poured hot sauce over Rory’s seeds. Rory gobbled them up happily. His sense of taste wasn’t the same between bird and human, but he could *feel* the heat lighting him up inside. It was glorious.

Max brought him a bowl with a little water that he could bathe in afterwards, and he laughed as he helped Rory get the hot sauce off. (Apparently, eating hot sauce as a bird wasn’t something he’d completely mastered yet.) Max bundled Rory up in a soft towel and cuddled him close. Rory burrowed into the warm fabric and relished being tucked up against Max. It wasn’t the same as when he was human, but it was still really good.

Max wasn’t willing to have Rory perch on his shoulder when he couldn’t fly, but he seemed equally unwilling to leave Rory alone, so he used a towel to fashion a sling to tuck Rory into. He then cast a spell on it so people wouldn’t notice it. Once Rory was settled, he asked, “Alright?”

Rory trilled his agreement. He liked being with Max, so of course everything was alright.

Since Rory couldn't serve the normal people, Max had to do it himself until Alex showed up after school.

"How's Rory?" was the first thing Alex asked when they arrived.

Max showed them the makeshift sling. Alex eyed him. "Is he bigger already?"

Rory chirped happily in agreement, and Max smiled as he said, "Yes, he's getting bigger. Apparently, he'll keep growing until he's full-grown as a bird, and then he'll be able to turn human again. Or at least, that's what I think will happen based on my asking questions or making comments and Rory chirping."

Alex smirked as Rory made more happy noises.

"Okay, then," Alex said. "I'll take over up here. You get into the back."

Looking relieved, Max went. Rory tried to rub against him in comfort, but he wasn't sure how well it was working given that he was in a sling across Max's torso. Only then Max's big hand reached out and gently patted him.

"It's fine," he told Rory. "I might not like the customers much, but I do understand I need to deal with them sometimes. And it's not your fault you can't help right now. This definitely requires the ability to speak English."

Rory wished more people could understand every being around them, but that wouldn't be happening anytime soon.

"I can work now," Max soothed, one of his fingers slipping between the folds of the sling to stroke along Rory's back. He made a hum of satisfaction. "You're very soft like this."

Rory twisted so he could peck at Max's finger.

Max laughed. "Mostly soft. You're *mostly* soft like this."

He spent several more minutes petting Rory, then declared it was time to get to work. Rory happily curled up in the sling, tucked up against Max's warm chest.



The next week passed rapidly. Max and Alex had made up a story about Rory being called away urgently for an emergency. They'd left it as vague as they could, but given the number of people that asked after him, they'd had to say something. Rory was touched by how many people expressed concern, although it was clear that Max could do without all the nosiness.

Every day, Rory continued to grow. He lost his downy feathers, and his full plumage grew in, all reds and golds and oranges. He started to fly again, which startled Max. Unfortunately, Rory soon grew too big to perch on Max's shoulder, at least when anyone could see. In his natural form, he was almost the length of Max's forearm, and while Max could still hide him with magic, it didn't work as well, because Max behaved too much like he had an increasingly large bird perched on him.

Rory had never tried taking on another bird form until after he'd regrown from his rebirth, and he didn't want to risk it now in case it caused problems.

Once Rory confirmed with several shakes of his bird head that neither his phone nor his keys were going to reappear when Rory-the-human did, Max got them both new phones. He used a clever spell to recreate a key based on a lock.

He pulled that one out of his safe and explained that while it could be used benignly for moments like this, there were a lot of hands it couldn't be trusted in.

Oh, yes, Rory hadn't thought of that.

"A Spellsmith should have designed it better," Max grumbled. "It should have been a lock owned by the caster of the spell, or tied in to intent. There are lots of ways it could have been made safer, if only someone had given a little care." He eyed the spell dubiously. "Unless it was created for a thief,

of course.” He shrugged. “Whatever the case, I’m keeping it out of the way.”

That made a lot of sense.

They didn’t have a D&D game on Friday, Max claiming that no one wanted to do it without Rory. Max had explained to Rory what had happened while he was being reborn, how they’d all outed themselves in one way or another—except for Tom, who was the lone completely normal person who hadn’t expected any of this. Apart from poor Tom, Rory had apparently been in good company with folks who weren’t being entirely forthright about themselves.

Should Rory have realized that David was a witch and that Stella and Edward had magical ancestry? Rory knew that magical traces could be hidden—it was how he could appear as a simple bird and not a shifter if he wanted—but he hadn’t thought about it as it could apply to others.

He still liked all of his D&D friends, and he hoped that they would still like him after this.

On Saturday, Alex showed him a drawing they’d made. In it, a red, gold, and orange-colored bird was surrounded by flames. They hadn’t got the adult shape quite right, but they’d done a very good job based on what they could see. Underneath it, Alex had written “Phoenix?”

Rory still wasn’t really supposed to tell anyone but his mate, but he’d obviously failed epically on that already. He was probably supposed to flee and leave them to doubt all their memories—he’d done that before—but he already knew that wasn’t going to happen.

Instead, Rory flew onto Alex’s shoulder, trilled at them, and rubbed briefly against their cheek.

“Alright,” Alex whispered. They lowered their voice even further. “And it’s not normal, right? Instead of just something everyone forgot to tell me?”

Rory reached out and used his wing to cover the words at the bottom of the drawing.

“Got it,” Alex said, their expression solemn. “No one’s going to hear it from me. Promise.”

Rory leaned into Alex again, trilling softly. He’d never doubted them.

On Sunday, Max got the call from Peter that Mr. Jones and his familiar had passed away. Rory was sad, but he was quite sure that Mr. Jones and his kitty had been ready to go. They’d had very long lives, and their bodies had been reaching their limits. Humans had finite end points. Unless they

bonded with a mythical shifter, of course. And *that* was a conversation he definitely needed to have with Max—when Max could actually understand him.

That evening, they cuddled up on the couch. Since Rory couldn't read in this form, Max had taken to either reading to him or putting on a movie or show they could watch together. Since Rory enjoyed spending time with Max regardless, he thoroughly approved of this plan and didn't really care what they did.

Rory was basically full-sized now, his talons large enough and sharp enough that Max always eyed them a little askance. He was now wearing long-sleeved shirts daily and had cast a strength charm on them so that there was no chance that Rory could harm him—or destroy his entire shirt collection.

Max seemed perfectly comfortable when Rory was perched on a blanket on the couch cuddled up next to him. Rory thought that pets with Max's lovely fingers was perhaps one of the greatest things that had ever been invented.

"Peter said that he or the lawyer would be in touch about the next steps for the books," Max explained. "The lawyer is a witch, apparently—and there was *tone* when Peter talked about him, so I think there's something going on there."

Rory trilled a noise of inquiry.

"I mean, I don't know anything for sure, but lawyers are often considered to be not great people by others." Max shrugged. "There are entirely decent ones, but lawyers often have a reputation for being ruthless and financially motivated. And if someone you care about has just died, it might be the worst time to have to talk to someone like that—or someone you think might be like that, you know?"

Rory nodded and tucked himself further into Max's side. When Rory had been waiting to find his mate, each moment of waiting hadn't actually been terrible, but if he let himself think too much about the idea of *always* waiting, that was where the distress lay.

Perhaps Peter was just worried that the lawyer was terrible or was imagining how unpleasant all the tasks of dealing with Mr. Jones' death could be. That would only be made worse by a lawyer being obstructive.

But if there was a mythical being with the gift to make people be nicer to one another, Rory had never met them. Given what the world could be like,

Rory wouldn’t blame them for being in hiding. Or maybe the Magic had judged it was an impossible task.

“Think of how different everything will be for Peter and all the staff. Will the person who inherits keep them all on?” Max wondered. “And will they really let us have access to all the books like Mr. Jones planned? Will someone contest the will? Or will we get to keep the books but have to move them all?”

Rory nudged him with his head, rubbing against his arm.

Max sighed. “Yes, I know I’m borrowing trouble. Mr. Jones’s collection is something that we’ve been trying to get access to since my mom was young. I feel like I really need to do it right, you know? And while I’ve got the snark down pat, I’m not sure that I’m ready to deal with an asshole lawyer. Hopefully, it’s simply Peter not getting along with them. Or maybe you can be very charming.”

Rory trilled. The only person he wanted to be charming for was Max.

Max ran a finger from the top of his head down his back, stroking the feathers.

“You’re very charming with what appears to be very little effort. You’re personable and friendly. The rest of us should probably take lessons.”

Rory preened a little; he couldn’t help himself. He liked that his mate admired this about him.

“You’re glorious like this,” Max assured him, fingers moving rhythmically. “But it’s a little harder to understand you.”

Rory sang out that if witches and normal people only listened a little harder, maybe they could actually understand other species.

Nōwē meowed to share her opinion that people were fools and never listened well.

Max’s fingers rubbed at the perfect spot at the back of Rory’s neck.

“I’m not sure I’m cut out to pick up another language, but I can try. I mean, I’m not sure I’ll ever get words, but I’m pretty sure that was bird for ‘pay attention to tone, you fool.’ How’d I do?”

Trilling happily, Rory leaned into Max further.

Max laughed. “Yeah, Nōwē uses that one a lot, too. Are you ready for bed?”

Rory chirped an assent, and Max held out his arm so that Rory could hop on and be carried into the bedroom. Rory’s wingspan was now such that it was becoming difficult to fly inside. Max had made a whole nest-like pile

of blankets for Rory on half of the bed because he certainly wasn't going to fit in Red's little box on the bedside table.

Rory settled down, and a few minutes later, Max reappeared from the bathroom, looking freshly scrubbed, dressed in his pajamas. Nōwē hopped up onto the bed and settled at the foot.

Max switched out the light and pulled the covers up over himself.

"Goodnight, Rory."

Rory trilled a goodnight of his own.



Rory woke up feeling warm and… different. It took him a long moment to realize it was because he had two arms and two legs. His eyes flew open. He'd never shifted in his sleep before, and he'd certainly never plastered himself over someone else, nestled against their back with a leg slung over their hip, one arm tucked against their back and the other stretched over their shoulder.

This was apparently exactly what he'd done on this occasion, though, and he could only be relieved that Max was at least wearing pajamas. Because rebirth still meant that Rory came back into this world with nothing but himself.

His attempt to carefully untwine himself from Max only succeeded in waking the other man, who made a grumpy sound of protest and then froze.

"Sorry," Rory said hurriedly. "Sorry, sorry. I shifted in my sleep."

Max had drawn clear lines, and Rory had inadvertently obliterated them.

Rory was jostled as Max suddenly twisted, turning around so that he was facing Rory—so that he could fling himself at him, wrapping *his* arms and legs around Rory.

"Oh, thank god," Max breathed against his neck, sounding desperately relieved. "You're alright."

Still not totally sure about the protocol when he was naked and he knew Max didn't like to be surprised with that, Rory nevertheless hugged Max back. If his mate was in distress, then Rory wanted to reassure him above everything.

"I'm fine," Rory promised. "I'm regrown enough to take human form, apparently, but I was fine before that, too. I regrow quickly, but it's still not instantaneous after a rebirth."

Max pulled back a little to gaze into his eyes and then leaned in again to kiss him. Rory fell into the lush heat of Max's mouth and the call of Max's emotions. This felt a bit more like reassurance and affirmation than anything overtly sexual.

When Max needed to breathe, he drew back and leaned his forehead against Rory's.

"I'm so glad you're alright," he breathed.

"I think that's my line," Rory said, trying for humor and only mostly succeeding. "You don't know the panic I felt when you were stabbed."

"I think we need to have a conversation about that," Max told him.

Rory had been expecting it since the moment he'd acted—but he'd do it again in a heartbeat, no matter what the outcome was, as long as Max was okay.

"Yes, of course," Rory agreed. It was clearly past time for all of this to be out in the open. "But are *you* alright?"

Max nodded. "Yeah, healed good as new. I clearly don't know anything about what you can do, but it feels like you healed the physical *and* mental trauma."

Rory nodded slowly. He'd never thought of it quite like that. "Yes, that's a good way to think about it. It's as close to a full reset as you can get without rolling back time."

"I have so many questions," Max told him. "But do you think you could put clothes on?" Max requested. "You're kind of distracting like this."

Rory laughed. "Yes, I definitely can. Although I might take a shower first. Is that okay?"

"Absolutely." Max smiled. "I mean, I tried to keep you clean, but with the amount of hot sauce you were guzzling, it was a losing battle."

Rory straightened his shoulders and attempted a haughty expression. "I'm a growing phoenix. I need fuel."

Max rolled his eyes, though he looked slightly stunned. He'd surely worked out what Rory was, but maybe it was still a little different to hear it confirmed for certain.

Rallying, Max observed dryly, "Unless your fire is literally fueled by hot sauce, I can't imagine there's any reason why you needed to consume so much."

Rory laughed. "Nothing quite so straightforward as that. Just give me a few minutes."

Max checked his watch. "Take as long as you want. It's just after eight, so there's time. I'll make coffee. Just let me go pee first."

"Sounds good," Rory agreed.

Max tossed Rory's robe at him as he passed the bedroom door, where the two robes were hanging on a hook, then headed into the bathroom. Rory pulled it on, wrapping it carefully around himself. Max had bought him one of those fuzzy, plush ones that was super cozy and felt a bit like being wrapped in a cloud. Rory loved it.

When Max emerged from the bathroom and made a beeline for the kitchen, Rory headed in, used the facilities, and then turned the water as hot as it would go before climbing in and luxuriating in the heat. It wasn't quite as good as the heat of flames, but it was much more practical in this setting.

When he finally emerged from the shower, he quickly dried his hair and body with a rapid burst of flames. He hadn't remembered to bring his clothes with him, so he pulled the robe back on and then passed into the bedroom to dress.

A few minutes later, he was in the kitchen with Max, seated at one of the bar stools. In addition to making coffee for himself, Max had made a spicy chai for Rory, as well as granola covered in hot sauce. Rory would have preened if he was still in bird form, and he happily started consuming both as Max sat down beside him.

"So phoenixes aren't affected by heat?" Max said wryly. "I did wonder a bit why you never seemed to burn your mouth gulping down hot liquids."

Rory paused, abashed. "Oh, yes, there isn't any fire or heat that can harm me. I mean, I can be consumed by my own fire, as you saw, but that's about it. There's nothing hotter than phoenix fire."

"And what exactly is phoenix fire?" Max wanted to know. "How many phoenixes are there? Why do none of my books tell me anything about this?"

Rory couldn’t do anything but smile at the barrage of questions. “I’ll answer everything, but it might take a bit of explaining. We call ourselves mythical shifters, by which we mean shifters who are a creature that is commonly considered to be a myth.”

Max caught the nuance immediately. “You consider yourself to be a phoenix who can shift into a human?”

Rory nodded slowly. “Mostly? I didn’t really think about it in any sort of detailed way for quite a long time. But I came into being as a phoenix, which is not how it works with other shifters.”

“Came into being?” Max repeated.

Rory nodded. “There may only be one of each of us. We’ve never been certain. But we didn’t have parents, and we’ve never had children—not that any of us have confessed, anyway. I’ve certainly never had any. The Magic created us, and we just *are*. I can’t even tell you how long it was that I was a phoenix before I became a human for the first time. I don’t think it was an issue of maturity or difficulty, it was more that I didn’t see any need to be anything other than what I was, until one day, I wanted to be human, and then that’s what I became.”

Max was staring at him with wide eyes. “But if there’s only one of you, then aren’t you each the most endangered species ever? Always on the brink of extinction?”

Rory tilted his head back and forth in a so-so gesture. “Sort of? I think many of us consider mythical shifters to be a sort of collective race, though we mostly each go our own way. We live for a really long time, and we’ve sort of been drifting around the world all this time, hoping one day to find our mates. So we don’t encounter one another all that often. It’s like a really long-distance family of like fifth cousins or something.”

Max snorted a laugh.

Rory grinned at him and continued, “We all agreed not to talk about what we are except with our mate. So I’ve kind of messed that up.”

Max was frowning now. “Surely, that’s happened before, where people have seen you or another mythical shifter do something inexplicable.”

Rory nodded. “That’s why the myths exist. Someone sees something they can’t explain, and they make up a story about it. But we aren’t really supposed to linger and corroborate.”

Max’s back went suddenly straight, and he looked alarmed. “You’re leaving?”

Shaking his head emphatically, Rory said, “Absolutely not. I mean, not unless you’re leaving with me.” He frowned. “Or I guess if you ask me to go. I won’t stay where I’m not wanted.”

Max reached out to grab his arm and give it a gentle squeeze. “You’re definitely wanted.”

Rory grinned. “Yeah, so, I’ll have to figure out something else here. Alex has already guessed I’m a phoenix.” At Max’s raised eyebrow, he explained about the drawing. “I don’t know if the others have figured it out exactly, but it’s not like it’s something that I can really hide given the drama of last week. We still haven’t heard from Tom?”

Max had been keeping him up to date on everything, mostly, but it was nice to actually be able to ask questions that Max understood.

With a shake of his head, Max said, “He told Sam he needed some space, and he’s been ignoring everyone else. He even removed himself from the group chat, which nobody took very well, especially David.”

“I’m sorry,” Rory said, feeling a bit terrible for the drama he’d caused.

Max eyed him. “Are we going to blame me for getting stabbed?”

“No!” Rory exclaimed. “Of course not.”

“Then we’re not going to blame you for saving me, either,” Max said firmly. “Oh, speaking of, I think I found the books that the jerk was trying to have the thief steal, the ones from his father that he was claiming were his.”

Rory perked right up. “Ooh, what’s in them?”

“I didn’t look yet,” Max said, smiling faintly. “I didn’t want to look without you.”

“Aww, you’re so sweet,” Rory told him.

Max rolled his eyes. “Actually, not to take away from the moment, but I thought I could invite everyone from D&D. Maybe it would be enough to get Tom back?”

Rory nodded immediately, promptly abandoning the image of the two of them cozy together. “Oh, yes, you should definitely try that!”

If they could reassure and include Tom, Rory would feel much better.

Max pulled out his phone and shot off what looked like several texts—right, because Tom had taken himself out of the group chat, so Max would have to send the message twice.

“I let everyone know that you’re back in human form, and I’m proposing taking a look on Friday before D&D. Hopefully everyone will agree to

come."

"Are you upset with David?" Rory asked carefully.

Max shrugged. "I mean, am I totally delighted? Not really. But I believe him when he says he's not investigating me anymore, and I think he genuinely likes the group. Besides, if he hadn't been setting me up for investigation, I probably wouldn't have a D&D group or know any of them, which would be a shame. It's also sort of nice to know that it's actually safe to talk amongst the group. I deal with a lot of witches who want spells, but not a lot of friends, you know?"

Rory nodded, because he'd seen that in Max's life, though he and Alex and the others always seemed to be trying to change that.

Max continued. "And while I guess there are some actions that are completely unforgivable, I think there are many that can be forgiven with time and perspective. He hid something from us, sure. It feels a lot like a betrayal. But he was actually doing his job, and if I *had* been a corrupt Spellreader, I'd want me to be stopped." He frowned. "Or, you know, not if it was me, because then I probably wouldn't want to be stopped. But if there were another corrupt Spellreader out there, I'd want them to be stopped. And it turns out that with the exception of Tom, we were all hiding things from one another—with our own very good reasons, as far as we were each concerned."

Rory sighed. "Tom's still pretty upset, huh?"

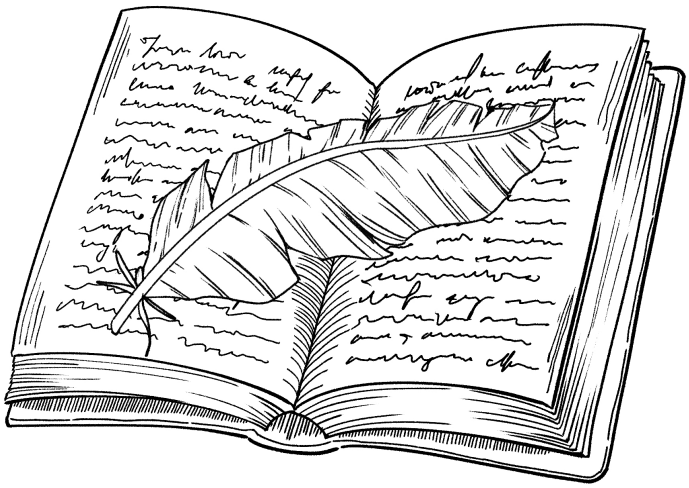
Max blew out a breath, nodding in agreement. "Yeah. All of us have some sort of connection to the magical world, even if it's tangential. Although none of us knew about the other—with the exception of Stella and Sam—I assume it feels to Tom like we were all collectively hiding something from him, like he was the odd man out. That's not a nice feeling."

Shaking his head, Rory agreed, "No, it isn't a nice feeling."

And just like that, they were back at what they'd started talking about.

Max was eyeing him speculatively. "You must have got that a lot as a mythical shifter."

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Chapter Nineteen

Max

Max had… mostly come to the conclusion that Rory was a phoenix. He'd regrown to look very much like Max had imagined a phoenix would look. He'd burst into flames and been reborn from his own ashes, which was pretty definitive.

But there was still part of him that hadn't been *fully* ready to believe until he'd heard it from Rory's mouth directly, until he'd seen the big, beautiful red and gold bird turn back into the man he… well. That was part of the whole issue, wasn't it?

Rory's lips tipped up. "Being a mythical shifter is the only experience I've ever known. And I've compared notes with other mythical shifters over the, uh, years, but we each have plenty of differences in addition to some commonalities."

Max thought about what Rory wasn't saying. "You've almost never put anything into a number of years. When you said you'd been a bird for ten years—"

"—less than ten years," Rory corrected. "Almost definitely."

Max rolled his eyes, but he couldn't help but smile. "Less than ten years, then. I assumed that was a chunk of your life. I know shifters often look younger than they are, but I've spent this whole time assuming you can't be older than, I don't know, fifty or maybe sixty, if you were aging extremely

well as a shifter. You look younger than me. But you're a lot older than that, aren't you?"

Rory peeked at him through his tawny lashes, and Max couldn't quite decide if he knew the effect that had on Max. He raised an eyebrow.

Rory confessed, "I'm kind of a lot old. Like, we weren't here when dinosaurs roamed the earth or anything like that, but…" He hesitated for a moment and then blurted out, "We like to say centuries, but, uh, millennia is probably more accurate."

Max stared at him, and then his mouth moved without conscious thought on his part. "That's one hell of an age gap."

Rory let out a surprised-sounding laugh, grinning at him. "Yeah, I guess it is. Most of the mythical shifters sleep sometimes. A hibernation-like sleep. For years or decades. Maybe longer."

"But not you?"

Rory shook his head, then amended, "Well, not exactly. As a mythical shifter, we don't die. We don't age, we don't get sick, and as far as I know, no one has succeeded in killing us. That's why we're still here after so much time. I'm sort of the exception to the rule. Unlike the others, I die—and then I'm reborn. I think sometimes I don't get reborn right away, or maybe the time until I mature is longer. I'm not sure if that's because I need a rest or it's not safe or what." He offered a tentative smile. "But this time, I knew I was safe right away because you were there."

There was a lump in Max's throat. "You die to protect people."

Rory nodded. "Yes. Unlike regular shifters, mythical shifters have a gift, a magical ability in addition to their ability to shift. Mine is a certain knowledge and influence over life and death."

"Holy shit," Max said blankly.

Rory grinned at him. "I know it sounds like a lot, but it's kind of a thing I've always been able to do, so it doesn't seem so weird to me."

Slowly, Max nodded. He supposed if you'd been doing something for *millennia*, it would seem pretty standard.

Rory clarified, "I could have been more clear about some of your questions about fate. I'm sorry about that. We agreed not to tell anyone but our mate about everything to try to protect ourselves."

Given that Max and every other witch and shifter on the planet was actively hiding themselves from normal people, he didn't suppose he could blame Rory for doing the same. It just wasn't as nice being on the "not

knowing” side of the equation, and he had even more sympathy for Tom now.

“I certainly wouldn’t want anything to happen to you,” Max told him truthfully.

Rory smiled softly. “Thank you. I, uh, had some trouble figuring out when was the appropriate time to reveal everything. You might still have decided you didn’t want to be my mate, but there was some information you needed in order to make that choice. I got a bit muddled and just kept leaving it. I shouldn’t have. Sorry.”

Max tugged Rory into his arms, nearly overbalanced the two of them on their stools, and declared that it was time to relocate to the sofa. The hugging worked much better on the cushions. It was incredibly reassuring to have all of Rory’s human body tucked up against Max, radiating heat. (And didn’t *that* make a lot of sense now.)

“I always want you to protect yourself,” Max assured him. “And I’m well aware that I didn’t sound very open to the idea of mates. You were right to be cautious.”

Max couldn’t imagine ever wanting to harm Rory no matter what, but people were complicated, and he could imagine in the abstract a scenario where that sort of reveal could go totally wrong for a mythical shifter.

Rory hugged him close and brushed a soft kiss to his cheek. “Thank you. I want you to know everything now so that you can make an informed decision.”

Max turned so that he was facing Rory more completely. “I thought I lost you when I was dying. And then when I woke up and you weren’t there, I was filled with this totally weird certainty that everything was fine, but I didn’t understand *why*. When I realized your ashes were swirling around, I was horrified, except there was still a part of me that believed it was okay even if I couldn’t understand how. I’ve spent the last week with you as a bird who couldn’t talk to me in a language I understood. All of that together cleared a lot up for me. I want you in my life. I can’t imagine it without you. You’re my mate, and I want to bond with you.”

Rory just stared at him for a moment, looking stunned, and then he launched himself at Max and tackled him in a hug, nearly squeezing the stuffing out of him.

“Yay!” he exclaimed jubilantly. “This is the best news!”

Max couldn’t help but laugh, wrapping his arms around the man who was now on top of him and hugging him close. Yeah, he definitely couldn’t imagine life without Rory in it.

After a few minutes, Rory sat up again and added, “Oh, but I should finish explaining. You still need to be fully informed before you make any decisions.”

That was fair enough. Max *did* like information. “What do I need to know?”

“If we bond, I’ll become your familiar.”

Max nodded. That was standard between witches and shifters. A relationship bond became a familiar bond; you couldn’t have one without the other. In rare cases, you could have a familiar bond without a relationship bond, but that was usually in the case of siblings or platonic partners or someone who was aromantic or otherwise had no interest in a romantic bond.

Rory added, “A mythical shifter familiar is *mostly* like a shifter familiar.”

If it was in the way that mythical shifters were *mostly* like shifters—they just lived forever and had extra magic—then Max definitely needed to know more.

“How do they vary exactly?” he asked.

“Well, it’s not varying, exactly.” A furrow appeared in Rory’s brow like he was trying to puzzle something out. “It’s more like… the degree. Like, bonding with me would extend your life to mine—just like usually happens with a shifter/witch bond!” Rory pointed out hopefully.

Max snorted. “Just in this case, you’re living forever.”

“Right,” Rory agreed.

Ho-ly shit.

“Like actual *forever*?” Max demanded.

Rory shrugged. “We don’t know for sure, I guess. Maybe the Magic will unmake us at some point the same way that it made us to begin with. But so far, there hasn’t been a fixed endpoint that we’re aware of.”

Yeah, that sounded like forever to Max.

“Okay, living forever,” he declared, cracking his neck and rolling his shoulders. “I can deal with that.”

Probably.

“Uh, how do we support ourselves forever?” Max wanted to know.

Rory frowned a little. “We might need to get some advice. Some of the other mythical shifters have amassed wealth over the centuries. I kind of got used to being reborn periodically and not worrying too much about material things.”

That actually made *a lot* of sense.

Rory smiled hopefully at him. “But now that I’m with you, we can definitely revisit that. You’d be here through the rebirth and there’d be more continuity. I can definitely get advice!”

Max was pretty sure that he couldn’t run the bookstore for millennia, because someone would probably notice that he wasn’t getting older. Some advice would be very helpful.

Max nodded. “I suppose it’s not an immediate problem. We’re doing well right now, and I don’t see that needing to change for years.”

Rory beamed at him.

“What else?” Max asked.

“Well, you know how you’re stronger as a witch once you bond with a familiar?”

Max nodded, following along. “And stronger still with a shifter familiar. You’re about to tell me I’ll be even stronger, aren’t you?”

Rory nodded, still smiling. “You’re so smart.”

Max huffed a laugh. “You don’t have to butter me up.”

Rory squawked, “Hey! I’m not buttering you up. That’s just the truth.”

Rolling his eyes, Max said, “Thanks. But honestly, while I know that’s why witches have been chasing after shifters for the last few decades, I don’t actually really care about becoming stronger.”

Looking fond, Rory said, “No, I don’t suppose you do. Honestly, I’ve always thought those are the better people to be gifted with magical strength.”

There seemed to be no getting away from the compliments, which made him squirm a little, so Max went for a diversion instead. “What else?”

“You probably don’t care about this, either, but unlike with the standard witch-familiar bond, you’ll be stronger even when I’m in human form.”

Max’s eyebrows rose. “Oh, interesting. So even though you think of yourself as a shifter foremost, my magic is stronger in both forms?”

Rory nodded. “I’ve heard people theorize over the years about why shifters need to be in their animal form. I think fundamentally, it’s a familiar bond *with* the animal. And while shifters are both their animal and human

selves, it's not quite as fundamental as it is for a mythical shifter. So they need to demonstrate that animal form. For me and the others, it's intrinsically who we are all the time. Or our magic is accessible all the time. I'm not totally certain."

"Is there a mythical shifter guidebook?" Max asked without any real hope.

Rory laughed. "No. We don't really write things down, for the most part. There isn't really a broken line of communication, given that we're still here."

Max considered this. He supposed it was a prime reason to record things. But—"Don't you forget things? Are you telling me you remember everything over thousands of years?"

Shaking his head with a smile, Rory negated, "No, definitely not. But I think our capacity to remember may be better than a mortal's. We discard things we don't need anymore, and at least with me, some information seems to be let go when I'm reborn. But I retain what I want to retain. There are certain things that sort of… fade, but I can recall them if I wish to."

This really was fascinating.

"Do you compare notes among one another?" Max asked. "How do you know it all?"

Rory seemed to consider this for a moment. "We do talk sometimes. Although most mythical shifters are solitary, we've run into one another enough times over the centuries to have shared information. And some of it…" His face screwed up in concentration. "I think we just *know*. Sort of like I know I'm a phoenix or that you're my mate. The knowledge simply is, and I know it's true."

Max supposed there were certain fundamental truths about himself that he'd be hard-pressed to explain.

"Okay, so we're living forever," Max summarized, still a little boggled that he was saying this, "and I'm stronger once we bond no matter what form you're in."

"Correct."

"Anything else?" Just how many changes could there be?

"If we bond—"

"When we bond," Max corrected, and it was totally worth it for the way Rory's face lit up.

“*When* we bond, we’ll be able to sense one another’s emotions like witches and familiars can.”

“Let me guess: it’s more intense.” Max was getting the hang of how this worked.

Rory laughed. “Actually, I’m not sure. It’s hard to compare and measure intensity of emotion that different people are experiencing.”

That was fair enough, Max supposed.

Clearing his throat, Rory didn’t quite meet his eyes as he said quickly, “We’ll, uh, actually be able to communicate telepathically.”

Max’s thoughts ground to a halt. “We’ll *what*?”

“Be able to communicate telepathically,” Rory repeated a little more slowly this time.

What on *earth?*

There were some spells that Spellsmiths simply couldn’t create. It had never made much sense to non-Spellsmiths, but they’d just say they *couldn’t* create the spell. In the annals of their history, there’d been some gruesome torture thanks to nefarious witches that had proved pretty categorically this wasn’t just the Spellsmiths’ version of *wouldn’t*. They really couldn’t create such a spell. Mind reading was one of them. Divination spells were another. Mental coercion was out (no forcing someone to do your bidding), but memory charms were a gray area—and unfortunately, people had been spending centuries coercing people in non-magical ways, or threatening people with other kinds of magic.

“It’s not mind reading,” Rory said hastily. “Not really. At least, not the way I understand it. We can’t just wander through one another’s minds. But we can basically… think thoughts to one another along with feeling emotions.”

“It sounds amazing,” Max assured him.

Rory’s gaze flew to him. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Max agreed, voice soft. Back at the beginning of September, he couldn’t have conceived of it, but being this intimate with Rory didn’t scare him. Their gazes caught and held, and as Max stared into Rory’s amber eyes, he wondered how he’d ever thought the man was ordinary. Well, a shifter, but still.

“What else?” he asked.

Rory blinked. “Oh, uh, I think that’s actually it? I mean, I’m sure there’s some details that I haven’t thought of, but I’m pretty sure those are all the

big ones that would impact you if—when—we bond. Oh, but I didn't finish explaining about fate. As a phoenix, I can sort of see how long people are going to live."

Ah. "So when you were talking to Mr. Jones, you *knew* he was going to die soon."

It had seemed natural enough, given how old and frail he'd seemed, but looking back, Max could see Rory's absolute certainty.

Rory nodded. "But the thing is, it's not usually as simple as that. Some lines have nearly reached the end; those are easy to see. But someone who's perfectly healthy might have a long lifeline… until they're in an accident or a terrible person comes into their life or they contract an illness. I think I see more… probability than anything. So it's not one certain fate that will happen no matter what. Just like we can choose to accept our mates or not, there are many ways our lives *could* go, although some ways are more likely than others."

Slowly, Max nodded. That actually made a fair bit of sense. But—

"You can see all our lifelines? Mine? Alex's? The D&D crew? Everyone who walks into the shop?"

Rory nodded his head. "Yes. But I mostly see it kind of casually. Which sounds ridiculous, I know. But as we've discussed, I've been doing this for a long time, and so the same way you see blond hair or brown eyes or dark skin, I see lifelines."

Max couldn't help but ask, "Isn't it terrible sometimes?"

Rory huffed a bit of a laugh. "Sometimes, yes. But it's like seeing a really sick person. With my magical gift, maybe I see it when others wouldn't, but otherwise, it's just a part of them, and it's our job as decent human beings to interact with everyone with dignity. And there are occasions where I'm able to sort of… prod someone to see a doctor or go to the hospital before it's too late."

Max swallowed. "Or sometimes, you die in their place."

Rory nodded, reaching out to squeeze Max's hands. Max clasped them back gratefully.

Rory explained, "I'd have done it a hundred times over to keep you safe. I can't bring someone back if they're long dead. I do better if they're not quite dead or have only just died."

Wow. For a moment, Max's brain scrambled at this matter-of-fact admission, but then he rallied.

“I think I know why you like The Princess Bride so much.”

Rory flashed him a grin. “‘Mostly dead’ makes all the difference!”

Max had known about magic his entire life, and this was still extraordinary.

“I’m also not a magic cure-all,” Rory continued, smiling ruefully. “I couldn’t have saved Mr. Jones even if I’d tried. He was at the end of his life. His body could no longer support him. My purview is mostly accidents and sudden deaths. Occasionally illnesses if the person could be healed over time.” Rory met his eyes, shrugging. “Like we already discussed, there isn’t a guidebook to any of this, so I’ve just figured out what works over time.”

And he’d had a lot of time to make discoveries.

“Uh, can I ask…?” Max trailed off, not sure how to phrase it, and after a confused moment, Rory grinned.

“Yeah, since there’s just me, there’s no rules that anyone’s ever told me forbidding me to tell anyone. I mean, I usually don’t because what I am is a secret, but you and Nōwē and Alex and the D&D crew are all looking good. Though, like I said, that doesn’t actually lock you in to die of old age for absolutely certain.”

“But you can keep an eye on it?” Max couldn’t help but ask. “And you could check my sister? Sorry, I shouldn’t—”

Rory squeezed his arm again. “Of course I’ll take a look at people you care about, Max. You don’t even have to ask. And I’m already meeting your sister when she comes after Christmas, right? I’ll make sure she looks healthy then. Obviously.”

He accompanied the last word with a look that said “you fool” more clearly than if he’d spoken it. Max couldn’t help but grin, feeling immensely relieved.

“Uh, speaking of Evie, can I tell her about this? I mean, she’s bound to notice eventually when I don’t seem to be getting older, right?”

Rory nodded. “I think I’ve already told more people than I’m supposed to, but I wouldn’t ask you to keep this a secret from your sister. I’d like to meet her in person first and actually get to know her myself, if that’s okay.”

Max almost laughed. “Yeah, that sounds totally reasonable. You can definitely get to know the person you’re going to spill all your secrets to.”

Rory grinned. “Great. I think I’m going to like Evie.”

Max groaned. “Oh, yeah. You two are going to get along like a house on fire.” Which made him think of flaming birds which made him think of *not*

flaming birds, and he blurted out, “How are you more than one shifter?”

Rory blinked at him. “Huh?”

“I mean, how can you be both a phoenix and a cardinal? Just another mythical shifter peculiarity?”

Shifters could only take one animal form. That was just… how it worked. Everyone knew that.

Nodding, Rory said, “Oh, yeah, that’s another mythical shifter thing. Another way to keep us safe, I think. Instead of appearing as a creature that people don’t realize exists, we can appear in a more standard animal form.” He hesitated for a moment and then admitted, “It’s not just a cardinal. I can appear as pretty much any bird.”

“No way,” Max breathed.

“Way,” Rory said with a mischievous grin.

Max nudged him, making him jostle on the couch, still smiling. “Any bird?”

Rory nodded. “It’s allowed me to blend in no matter where I was in the world. A cardinal works great here, but it wouldn’t do in Africa or Antarctica.”

Max’s eyes went wide. “You can shift into a *penguin*?”

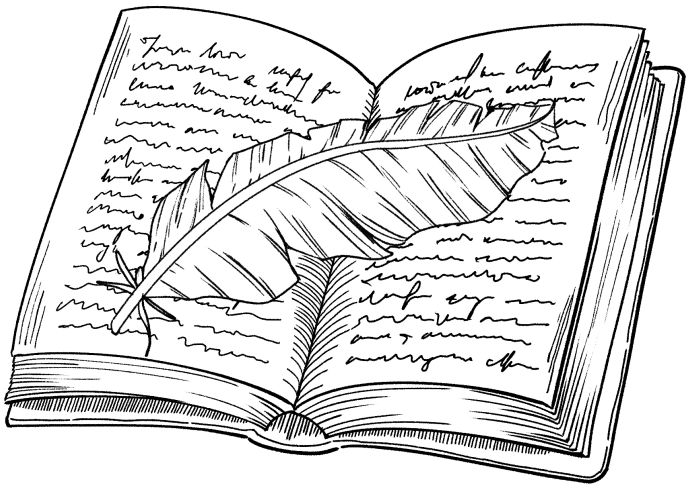
Rory laughed. “Yes. I usually shift into a bird with flight capabilities, but I can shift into any bird.”

“That’s amazing,” Max said, and then made himself keep his mouth closed.

Rory’s eyes were dancing with laughter now. “You want to see, don’t you?”

Max couldn’t help but nod eagerly.

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Chapter Twenty

Max

Rory pulled back a little, and a moment later, there was a penguin on the cushion where he'd been a second ago. Max wasn't sure why this transformation was getting to him so much. He'd already understood that Rory was a shifter, and the whole "rebirth from the ashes" had made the mythical part more than evident. But there was something about seeing Rory in a new form, or maybe simply seeing a penguin *right there*, that really brought this home.

"You're really cute," Max told him.

Rory flapped his flippers and squawked at him. Nōwē jumped up onto the coffee table and was watching them intently. At least Max didn't have to worry anymore that she might try to eat Rory.

A second later, Rory was a bright green parrot. He flew around the room, then transformed into a bald eagle, a hummingbird, and a turkey. Max couldn't help but laugh, but he assured Rory that he was very majestic.

Rory turned back into a grinning human, and Max rose from the couch to pull him into his arms and press a soft kiss to his lips.

"You're amazing," Max told him. "I'm so glad you came into my life."

"I feel the same way," Rory said, eyes bright. "I don't really have words to explain how amazing it was to look over and see you there. It's everything I've ever wanted."

If Rory were a different person, Max might crumble under that pressure. But Rory had made it so clear in the almost two months that they'd known one another that he liked Max just as he was. And yes, he'd been sure of their bond much sooner than Max was. Now that Max understood that he was a mythical shifter and had been waiting centuries—millennia, holy shit—for his mate, his certainty made more sense. But he'd waited, let Max come to his own conclusions, and never pressured him.

And that was what filled Max with the confidence to say, "I think we should bond."

Rory blinked at him, golden eyes going wide. "Really?"

Max nodded, feeling even more certain now that the words were out. "Yes. You've known for months; I'm slow, but I get there eventually. I could have died last week, and that's reminded me that there aren't any guarantees in life. I wasn't expecting you, but it turns out you're exactly what I've always wanted. I love you, and I want to bond with you."

Rory lit up—literally. It was like a glow was emanating from his skin, and his hair was… actually on fire?

Max pointed. "Uh, should I be worried about your hair?"

Rory's brow furrowed, and he tried to look up at his own hair, which didn't work at all.

"It's on fire," Max explained.

Rory made an "oops" face, and a moment later, the fire vanished as though it had never been, leaving Rory's hair completely untouched.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly. "Uh, like we discussed before, fire doesn't hurt me, and I'd never let it hurt you. It's been a while since I lost control like that, but, uh, all my dreams just came true, so. I love you, too!"

A full-body shiver raced through Max. He'd never been anybody's dream before. He'd been a loner in school, and his sporadic dating partners had always seemed to want things he was unwilling to give.

And then there was Rory.

Rory had done an excellent job of explaining how it wasn't exactly fate and was more like probabilities and possibilities, but even Max could see how the two of them really did seem to be perfect for one another. Denying that because he was worried that some mythical force had willed it so was not a hill Max was willing to die on.

When he leaned in, Rory met him halfway. The kiss was hot and lush and everything that Max hadn't known kissing could be. (What exactly was it

about emotional intimacy that made that switch flip? Max was maybe going to need to do more research on being demisexual. But definitely not right now.)

And then Max's alarm went off. He pulled away with a groan. "Dammit. We need to open the bookshop. Raincheck. But, like, tonight raincheck, as long as you're okay with that."

Rory pressed another kiss to Max's lips, this one chaste. "I'm definitely okay with that. Actually, it's probably better that we wait a little while. A lot has happened recently."

That was true. Rory had *just* turned back into a human this morning. Jumping him was something Max could honestly say he'd never expected to do. (And okay, he hadn't actually done *that*, but it was amazingly close by Max's standards.)

As they headed downstairs, Nōwē meowing at their feet, Max said, "Remember, you've supposedly been away for the past week."

"Right," Rory said, making a face.

"You can still keep it vague," Max reassured him. "You don't owe anyone any details. But assuring them everything's fine now or something like that will make it seem less mysterious while cutting off avenues for all but the most nosy."

Rory laughed.

The workday passed reasonably quickly, all things considered. (Max had never wanted to get through a workday to be with a partner before. It was a bit irritating and also made him feel kind of giddy.) He spent the first couple hours out with Rory, making sure that everyone behaved, but then Rory shooed him into the back room.

"Go do your work and let me do mine," Rory admonished.

It was weirdly wrenching to be away from Rory at first. Max had gotten used to having the bird constantly on or near him. But once he'd settled down with a few spellbooks, it began to feel normal again.

A few hours later, Max was up front when Alex arrived and gave Rory a gigantic hug that went on for a long time. "I'm so glad you're alright. It's so good to see you again!"

Rory returned the hug tightly. "It's good to be back."

Alex tugged out their phone. "I know Max already told everyone you were fine, but I'm just going to reinforce it."

"Have you heard anything from Tom?" Rory asked.

Alex shook their head. “No. But then, it’s not like I really knew him—I’m just the person who turned into a bear the first day I met him and contributed to the overall panic.”

Rory hugged Alex again, even as Max said, “That’s absolutely not your fault.”

Alex shrugged.

Yeah, it seemed like all of them felt bad for what had happened that night.

“I’ll text Tom,” Rory promised. “Maybe he’ll ignore me, but I’ll try.”

The group chat had been dinging all day with lots of well-wishes, memes, and questions for Rory. (Max had muted it, eventually, to actually get some work done.) Tom had sent only one text, telling Max he was glad Rory was better but he wasn’t coming on Friday. Max hoped that Rory had better luck.

Alex gave them both hugs before leaving. “I’m so glad you’re both still here. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The two of them waved Alex off, and Max closed and locked the door, flipping the open sign to closed and activating the wards that would ensure that no one would be bothering them—or, you know, breaking in to try to steal books and stabbing Max instead.

In the apartment, they fed Nōwē and then ate dinner because Rory pointed out that it would ruin the mood if their stomachs were grumbling during the intimate moments. Max couldn’t help but laugh and agree.

But then the dishes were cleaned and put away, Nōwē was curled up on the cat tree by the window, and they had the evening ahead of them.

“Still want to do this?” Rory asked.

He looked just the tiniest bit anxious, a furrow in his brow, and Max didn’t want Rory to ever feel like that because of him.

“Definitely want to do this,” Max promised.

He didn’t totally know where to start, but he figured kissing was a pretty sure bet. Rory kept the pressure light and warm, letting Max be the one to deepen the kiss until they were both breathing heavily and Max’s hands had found their way to Rory’s hips, tugging him closer, feeling his erection pressing into Max’s abdomen.

“You want to fuck me?” Max asked.

Rory pulled out of the kiss, eyes hazy, though they sharpened as he focused on Max. “Uh, just to clarify, we don’t have to have sex to bond.”

Max blinked. “We don’t?”

Rory shook his head. “It’s one of the easiest ways to get the requisite intimacy, sure, but it’s not required. Intent from both parties is essential. There’s usually a bite, which is how magic is exchanged.”

Max nodded. You needed a shifter to have a bond. Max had never thought of it as shifter magic at work, but that actually made sense. It wasn’t a spell like a witch could perform, but shifter magic was unique and powerful in its own way.

“Mythical shifters are different,” Rory told him.

Max grinned. “Of course you are. How does it work for mythical shifters?”

“Intimacy and intent, like I said, but mythical shifters typically share magic directly. The form the magic takes varies between species. So, like, if you have tentacles or flames or scales…”

“Okay,” Max said, nodding his understanding. “So, this won’t end up with me having a bite mark?”

That was one thing so many of those shifter romance novels *had* gotten mostly right.

Rory shook his head. “No. It’s usually a more symbolic marking for us.”

Max narrowed his eyes. “Am I likely to be set on fire by anything we do today?”

Rory snorted. “No, of course not. I mean, there will probably be flames, but they won’t harm you.”

He narrowed his eyes further. “Are any of my belongings likely to be lit on fire? Should we be doing this in the bathtub?”

Rory flat-out giggled. “Absolutely not. I mean, not unless you want to have shower sex. Phoenix fire only burns what I want it to burn. That *could* be the entire building if there’s a reason the entire building needs to be on fire, but otherwise, I could walk through your entire bookshop with flames coming out of the top of my head, and all the books would be fine.”

Max blew out a relieved breath. “It’ll probably take me a bit to get used to that, but good to know. I think we should relocate to the bedroom. I want you to fill me up and bond with me.”

“You’re sure?” Rory asked, expression clear and totally non-judgmental. “Like I said, we don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

“I’m sure.”

Rory looked like he wanted a bit more than that, and Max tried to figure out how to put into words what he was feeling. It wasn’t always

comfortable for him to share like this, but he wanted to be more open with Rory, and he did actually appreciate that Rory was checking in and not just assuming everything was okay. He'd felt pressured to say yes before, and Rory always made sure every step of the way that Max's consent was real and ongoing.

Max said, "I mean, I'm still figuring all of this out, and I'm pretty sure I won't want sex as frequently as most people do, but that frotting we did on the couch was the hottest thing I've ever experienced. I'd like to try this, too—and I know if it turns out that I don't like it or want to stop, you'd be okay with that."

Rory smiled at him. "Yeah, that was pretty much what I was going to say. You can always change your mind. Consent is the sexiest thing ever, and if you're not feeling it at any point, we can pivot. We can read a book or watch a movie, or I can turn into a penguin again."

This surprised a snort out of Max, making Rory grin even brighter.

"Great," Max said, shaking his head but utterly failing to hide his happiness. "As long as we have a plan that involves spontaneous bird transformations."

Still smiling at one another, they headed into the bedroom. It wasn't like Max had never done this before, but a crowd of past memories of various awkward and uncomfortable moments were threatening his mood.

And then Rory said, "Slow strip tease or speedy rip everything off?"

Laughing and relaxing, Max requested, "Maybe not so fast that we lose our balance and trip, but leaning towards that end of the spectrum."

"You got it," Rory said cheerfully.

Was it possible Max had never had sex with people who weren't jerks before? On the other hand, he'd not exactly been emotionally available, especially after his parents died, and he'd been keeping a big secret from most of them. Maybe it had gone both ways—not that pressuring people for sex was ever cool, but there had been a while there where Max had thought maybe it would click and he'd "get it" the way other people automatically seemed to.

Who knew truly caring about someone was important? Well, everyone who'd figured out they were demi faster than him, obviously. But maybe that didn't matter. Maybe he wouldn't ever have gotten close to anyone except his mate. Or was Rory his mate *because* Max had gotten close to

him? The idea of fate or something fate-like was still weird, but Rory had mostly reassured him on that front.

Max watched Rory for a moment, admiring the long lines of his body as he tugged his shirt over his head, revealing miles of smooth skin. It was still a little hard to wrap his brain around the fact that all of a week ago, Rory had burned to ash and then been reborn so that he could save Max. He was so glad Rory was unharmed.

And then Rory was shucking his pants and underwear, and Max's breath caught in his throat. If he were being perfectly honest, he'd always found naked bodies a little bit… silly. Humans didn't seem to be built on very practical grounds, and the glimpses he'd caught of porn! How could *anyone* find that attractive or arousing?

But staring at Rory right now, Max's mouth was dry, his stomach clenched, and his cock had taken notice—and so had Rory's, bobbing between his legs and pointing at Max. He swallowed thickly, feeling heat pool in his middle. If this was what other people felt all the time, Max understood a little better now why they sometimes behaved like fools.

Rory smiled at him. "Would you rather stay clothed?"

Max looked down at himself. Shit. Right. He'd agreed to undress, and then he'd gaped at Rory instead. Max cleared his throat even as he yanked his shirt up and over his head.

"You're distracting," he muttered as the cloth cleared his face.

Rory's smile deepened. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Popping the button of his jeans and then fumbling with the zipper, Max finally succeeded in undoing them enough that he could tug them down and kick them off. Somehow, Rory had made it look graceful. Max had… not.

He'd left his briefs on, only now that felt awkward, and a bolt of anxiety spiked through him. Only then Rory was there, twining his arms around Max's neck and gazing at him with those bright golden eyes.

"Hey. Consent is sexy, remember?"

Max huffed out a laugh, hands coming to settle on Rory's hips instinctively.

He cleared his throat. "It's been a while, but this was usually the point where my partners realized I wasn't as excited about this as they were. They were generally not, uh, happy with that."

Understatement of understatement. Well, some had taken it as a challenge, which was almost worse.

“There are so many other things we could be doing,” Rory assured him easily. “Remember, the penguin transformation is still on the table.”

Max couldn’t help but smile, even though the thickness in his throat was maybe another emotion trying to get out.

He blew out a breath and admitted quietly, “I feel like I’m ruining the mood—and I’ve never wanted the mood as much as I want it with you.”

“We’re not in any rush,” Rory assured him. “Brains and bodies are complex, and they don’t always agree with one another.”

“I don’t think I’m worried about being with you,” Max offered. “I think I’m remembering being worried from before.”

“That’s how we learn,” Rory agreed. “We take past experiences and map them onto future events to try to figure out what’s safe and what will make us happy. It can take time to wrap your brain around a significant change in that regard.”

Max sighed deeply. He appreciated the understanding, really he did, but he still felt like a bit of a failure. He reminded himself that Rory had been accepting from the start, and he’d been very clear about how they both needed to want this.

Bonding probably wouldn’t go well if one person was anxious. He licked his lips. “Do you think we could make out in bed for a bit and then maybe call it a night?”

Rory grinned at him, like Max had just made the best suggestion ever.

“Of course we can. Shall I put my underwear back on?”

Max didn’t say anything, but his expression apparently gave him away, because Rory stepped back to grab his briefs and tug them up. It was one scrap of fabric, really, but it somehow felt like a lot more.

And then Rory leaped onto the bed, making Max laugh again even as he climbed into it altogether more prosaically. They got settled under the covers, and then Rory slid closer, near enough to touch but not *quite* touching, because he was waiting for Max, of course. Max tugged him into his arms, and Rory settled on top of him. They moved at the same time, coming in for a kiss, and Max found himself relaxing into it even as it fired up his blood.

It wasn’t often that Max was faced with this much naked skin, but Rory’s warmth—literally and figurative—made an answering heat leap up in Max. He wasn’t sure how one person could embody *safe*, *heat*, *arousal*, *comfort*,

and yet somehow, Rory did. It didn’t feel contradictory, either. Instead, it was everything Max had never known he wanted.

Max was soon lifting his hips up, trying to chase the friction as Rory ground down on him. Their bodies were slick with sweat, and Max could honestly say he’d never been this turned on before.

“Will you fuck me?” Max asked.

“Do you have lube?”

Max’s thoughts ground to a halt, and he froze. “Uh… maybe? Does lube expire?”

There was a second of silence, and then Rory burst into laughter. Max followed a moment later, unable to believe that he’d ruined the moment yet again, only it seemed to be okay.

Rory’s face was bright with amusement and fondness as he looked down at Max. “I think maybe we should pick up some lube we’re sure is safe before we put it in any of the places we’re planning to put it.”

Max snorted. “Yeah, the last thing this needs is a trip to the ER for an awkward rash.”

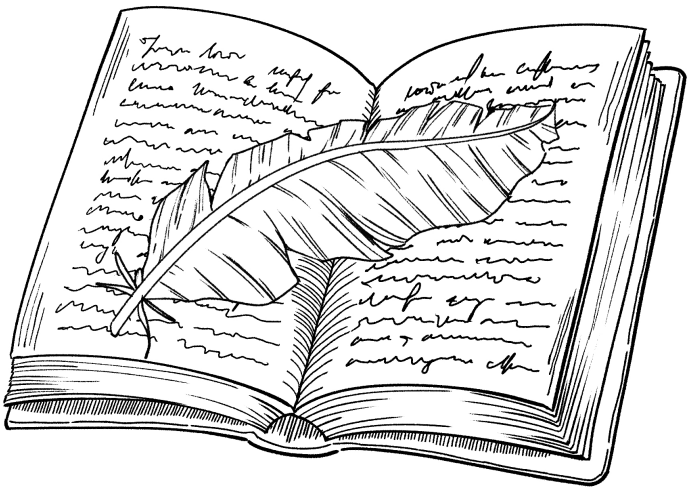
“Want to cuddle, and we can raincheck this again?” Rory asked.

Although the stubborn part of Max wanted to insist that they proceed, he recognized, reluctantly, when he was beaten. Rory would never agree to something that might make Max uncomfortable or hurt him.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “But we’re doing this! I swear.”

Laughing softly, Rory shifted off him and curled up against his side. “We’ll get there. When we’re ready.”

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Chapter Twenty-One

Rory

Tuesday and Wednesday, Max worked almost exclusively in the back room, finding spells for witches that had piled up while Rory had been a phoenix and Max had spent most of his time in the front or worrying about Rory. (He'd never said that was what he'd been doing, of course, but Rory had been there, and he'd noticed the general lack of productivity.)

They had a spicy curry for dinner that made Rory hum with satisfaction with each fiery bite. And then after dinner, Max grinned at him. There was something particularly mischievous or almost… coy about this smile.

"Want to see what I learned today?" Max asked.

Rory smiled back. "Of course."

There wasn't really anything that Rory didn't want to know about Max.

Max sketched a charm with his finger, and then Rory watched it come to life as Max infused it with his magic and held out his hand. A moment later, something slick pooled in Max's hand. It took Rory a moment to understand what he was seeing, and then he looked up into Max's grinning face.

"Did you figure out how to *magic* lube?" Rory demanded.

Max's smile was huge. "I sure did. It's not something I've ever wanted to know before, but it occurred to me that surely, some witch who was more interested in sex than I am must have thought of this before, especially given the relative newness of commercial lubricant. If you really wanted to have sex with someone back in the 1600s and you didn't have any oil to hand, what were you going to do?"

Rory's grin was almost as big as Max's. "Convince a Spellsmith to make a lube spell, apparently."

They both snickered.

"How handy," Rory said, which made Max snort inelegantly and oh so endearingly.

Rory hadn't actually meant the pun, but he stood by it.

"Want to go see if magical lube is superior to the store-bought kind?" Max asked.

"I really do."

Rory had wanted Max to set the pace. Since he'd gone to the trouble of finding the spell *and* bringing it up, it was clear that this was what he wanted.

"And we don't need condoms, right?" Max asked.

Shifters and witches didn't pass on STIs and diseases the way that humans did. They were generally hardier, though not completely immune to human illnesses.

"Not unless we'd prefer them. It's less messy that way," Rory said carefully.

He'd gotten the feeling Max wasn't a fan of any messes related to sex.

Max shrugged. "I didn't buy any. I kind of feel like a bonding shouldn't have condoms."

Rory smiled softly. "A bonding doesn't even have to have sex, remember. We can make of it what we want—well, within certain parameters."

Max considered for a moment, and then requested, "Let's try it like this. Maybe I'll be picking up a jumbo box of condoms tomorrow."

Rory grinned. "Sounds good."

Getting undressed today was hampered by the fact that Max was cupping a handful of lube. He made a face.

"Note to self: only summon lube when you actually need it."

"You could summon it again," Rory pointed out. "Or you could let me help."

Max's eyes went dark. "Yeah?"

Rory tugged his own shirt off even as he stepped closer. "Well, I do want us to be very equal in this. So if I've lost my shirt, you should really lose yours, too."

At Max's nod, Rory lifted Max's shirt over his head and tugged it off, both of them carefully pulling it off his left arm so as to preserve the little puddle of lube.

Rory slid out of his pants next, leaving his underwear on this time, before he moved to Max's jeans, carefully undoing the button and zipper and then sliding the fabric down his thighs and knees and calves—with maybe a bit more touching than was strictly necessary.

He wound up on his knees in front of Max, who was looking down at him and breathing heavily.

"Lift," Rory said, tapping on Max's left leg.

After a moment where he seemed almost dazed, Max lifted his leg, allowing Rory to tug his pants all the way off one leg and then repeat the instructions with the other. The view was *very* nice from here, and Rory could see Max's erection tenting the fabric of his briefs.

"Do you like blowjobs?" Rory asked.

Max's face twitched, and Rory rose smoothly to his feet, because that had definitely not been enthusiastic agreement.

"No?" he asked mildly. "Not everyone does, and that's totally fine."

Max sighed. "I, uh, might actually like them with you, but my memory of them is mostly of someone 'trying to get me in the mood' when I, uh, wasn't. Or giving one, and mostly, I was just thinking that my jaw was getting sore and when would this be over."

Ah.

Rory leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to Max's lips, which he returned.

"That's the fun thing about a new relationship with someone who isn't a total jerk: figuring out what the two of you actually like together."

Max huffed a laugh. "Yeah, okay. Way to sound reasonable about it."

Rory waggled his eyebrows. "So. You, me, frotting?"

And just like that, Max was smiling again. "Yes. Let's do that."

They tumbled into the bed together, Max's hand still curled around the lube. They wound up with Rory on his back, pressed into the mattress by Max's delicious weight.

Rory thought that might be all they did tonight, which would be totally fine, but then Max gasped out, "Lube. Can you get me ready?"

"Of course," Rory said. "If you're sure."

Max just nodded. "I've always found it awkward, doing it myself. Possibly because I didn't do it often, and probably because I wasn't that into it when I was doing it. But with you, all of me feels all fired up."

Rory nodded. "I'd be delighted. Just tell me if we need to switch to project penguin at any time."

Max snorted and nodded, his eyes warm and bright. He didn't look uncomfortable, which made Rory feel a lot better.

"Do you have a preference for position?" Rory asked.

"I definitely want to see you."

They rearranged so that Max was on his back and Rory was between his thighs. Rory took possession of the magical lube, slicked up his fingers, and proceeded to stretch Max open more carefully than he'd ever stretched anyone open in his life. He made sure to liberally graze his mate's prostate, which soon had Max squirming and moaning and telling him to get on with it.

Once Rory was sure that Max was adequately prepped, he slicked up his own cock.

"Still good?" he checked.

"Still good," Max confirmed. "I want you to fill me up. I want to bond with you. I want to be your mate."

"I want that, too," Rory breathed, the fiery heat of arousal ramping higher inside him.

He'd never given up hope that he'd find his mate, but as the centuries had passed, it had been harder to stay quite as positive. And yet, here he was. He'd let the Magic tug him where it thought he should go, and there was nowhere Rory would rather be.

He pushed into Max slowly and carefully, cataloguing every expression and body movement. He also kept one hand wrapped around Max's cock so he could slowly stroke him and remind Max of the fun bits. One of Max's legs was hooked around him, and Rory was clasping the other, connecting them.

But Max's gaze never left Rory's, his expression wide and open and vulnerable as they came together. His eyelids fluttered as Rory settled fully inside him.

"You're so hot," Max breathed.

Rory could only grin. "Thank you." He sobered a little. "Remember to tell me if anything doesn't feel good. I don't mind stopping no matter what."

Max nodded. "I feel hot and full and turned on and happier than I can ever remember being."

Rory felt tears sting his eyes. "Me, too." He sniffed. "Still want to bond?"

"So much."

"So just remember that intent is super important. Keep wanting to bond, and I'll take care of the rest." Then his smile turned a little wicked. "I'll take care of you, period."

Max grinned. "Yeah? You think you can make me feel good?"

Rory pulled carefully out and then thrust into Max again, angling just right to nail his prostate. Max groaned, and Rory smiled. Yeah, he was pretty sure he could make Max feel good. He repeated his movements again and again, glorying in every response that he could pull out of Max, in the proof that Max was enjoying this. His color was high, and sweat sheened his skin. It was a very good look for him.

Fire and pleasure raced through Rory's veins, igniting him from the inside out. And then Max's breath caught, and after a startled moment, Rory caught sight of the glow in the room. He was on fire again, and he appeared to have wound up with a set of fiery wings streaming from his back. He hadn't known that was a thing that could happen. But then, he'd never been with his mate before.

Max's face was bathed in the flickering light, an expression of awe on it that Rory had never seen before.

"You're so beautiful," he breathed.

"That's definitely you," Rory argued, leaning in to kiss him, trying to put all his feelings into the touch of their lips since words seemed suddenly clunky and inadequate. Max melted into the connection, eager and pliant beneath him.

This was Rory's mate. Max was his and he was Max's, and they were going to bond. Then nothing could ever take Rory away from Max, or Max away from Rory. They'd be together forever.

Rory wanted that *so* much.

"I want to bond with you," Rory told him. "I want to be yours forever."

Max swallowed, a smile suffusing his face even as his eyes filled with unshed tears. "I want to bond with you, too. And I most definitely want to be yours forever."

Rory's fiery wings enfolded them, and while Max let out a startled breath, he didn't look afraid.

Rory started to move again, each thrust driving the heat and pleasure higher inside him. Max rocked into his movements, trying to prolong the contact, which made Rory smile.

Rory started to pump Max's cock harder, in time with his strokes, and Max hissed.

"Going to come for me?" Rory asked.

Max was breathing like he'd run a race. "Yeah," he gasped. "Gonna come. Just for you."

Rory stroked harder, hips and hand working in tandem until Max cried out, body clamping down on Rory's cock as Max's back arched, his eyes fluttering closed. The sweet pressure triggered Rory's own orgasm, and he spilled into Max, filling his mate, binding them together. His fiery wings brushed across Max's collarbone and shoulder, Rory's magic reaching for Max's, which immediately twined with his, melding into one beautiful whole.

Almost before Rory's eyes, Max's lifeline unfurled, spooling longer and longer by the golden line that was Rory's. (It wasn't *quite* sight, but sort of a… sight feeling.) And the feeling of *Max* blossomed in Rory's mind, sated and satisfied and *happy.*

Rory couldn't help but preen, and Max's breath caught. "Oh, my god, is that you? Are you *preening* right now?"

Max peered up at him, huffing a laugh at the ridiculous smile that Rory could feel on his face. He was powerless to stop it.

"You're my mate," Rory said, like a fool.

"Yeah, yeah," Max said, but he was smiling. "And you're my mate. You're also still inside me. And I have come cooling on me. It's kind of gross."

Trying not to snort with laughter that might be misunderstood, Rory carefully pulled out of Max.

"Your poker face is better when I can't feel you laughing at me," Max grumbled.

Ah, right. That might take a little getting used to. He bundled up all the affection he felt for Max and sort of… pushed that at him instead.

Max sucked in a sharp breath, and then he said, "I love you, too. But you were right. The dripping bits are kind of gross. Can we have a shower now?"

Grinning, Rory climbed out of bed and held out his hand. "We can definitely have a shower."

In the bathroom, Max caught his first glimpse of the mark that Rory's magic had left on him, a pattern of feathers and flames that curled over his collarbone in red and gold. Rory had an open book etched over his heart, and Max laughed as he read the spell depicted on its page.

"It's an unlocking spell."

"You have definitely unlocked my heart," Rory told him with a grin.

"That's amazing," Max said, peering closer, and then grimacing. "And it will be even more amazing after we're clean."

They showered together, Rory making sure that Max set the temperature so that it was something he was comfortable with. He shouldn't burn now, but a lot had just changed in his life, and there was time to let him adjust.

Once they were clean, Rory showed Max how he used flames to dry off and then offered to do the same for Max, whose eyes widened in surprise.

“Yeah, okay.”

He felt a little trepidatious but also overwhelmingly full of trust.

Rory swallowed thickly and extended his flames, letting them flicker over Max. He never would have let them hurt Max even before they’d bonded, but they *couldn’t* hurt him now.

Max shivered and let out something that was a lot like a giggle. “That tickles.”

Rory laughed and swept his flames over his mate one more time before drawing them back inside himself.

“There. All dry.”

Raising his hands to run them through his hair, Max eyed himself in the mirror.

“That is super handy. I guess it might not feel as great in the height of summer, but it was really pleasant now.”

Rory shrugged. “I’m a phoenix. I always like heat.”

“We’re going to have arguments about the air conditioning next summer, aren’t we?”

Rory shrugged innocently, and Max laughed. He ran his hand along the pattern magically traced into his skin, then reached out and touched Rory’s, finger stroking over the skin in a way that made Rory shiver.

“It’s amazing,” Max said solemnly, gaze full of wonder. “Beautiful.”

“That’s you and me,” Rory told him. “Amazing and beautiful.”

“You’re a sap,” Max said, but his emotions glowed with satisfaction and happiness.

“Your sap,” Rory qualified.

Max rolled his eyes. “Want to read for a bit?”

“I’d love to,” Rory agreed.

They changed the sheets, since Rory could easily pick up on how much Max would prefer that, and then they climbed into bed together. The quiet hum of Max’s contentment only made Rory feel more content himself.

He’d waited a long time to find his mate, and it had unquestioningly been worth it.



Friday, shortly after 8pm, found the usual suspects assembled in the basement. Tom was there, but he glared at David any time the man so much as looked at him, and he was a little to one side, an arm wrapped around his middle, like he was trying to keep his distance from everyone. He was definitely giving off “do not approach” vibes, but in a lonelier way than Max once had. Max had been grumpy. Tom was hurt.

Rory hadn’t hesitated to add his own plea to everyone else’s that Tom would come back, and he’d maybe laid on a little bit of the guilt, letting Tom know how bad he felt that his actions had precipitated such an upset for the whole group.

Tom had sounded a weird mixture of fed up and resigned when he’d texted back.

TOM

You were trying to help Max, and I would never blame you for that. The problem isn’t what you did but all the secrets that got revealed as a result. That’s not you. That’s just a group of people keeping so many secrets it’s hard to keep track.

RORY

But for reasons.

TOM

[eye roll emoji] There are always reasons. But do you know what it’s like to feel like people you care about have been hiding everything from you?

RORY

Unfortunately, I've had to hide my entire life.

TOM

…

Fine. I'll come. Just… don't expect too much, okay?

RORY

Promise.

Despite his promise, Rory had kind of hoped that Tom would remember why he liked them when he saw them all again, but it didn't look like that was the case. David also looked like someone had kicked his favorite kitten, and Sam looked like she couldn't decide if she should be siding with Tom on principle. It felt awkward and off in a way that Rory really didn't like. Most people had given Rory a hug, though, and they'd all assured him in person that they were glad he was alive and well.

Carefully, he explained to them, "I'm what's called a mythical shifter. Extremely rare, and as you saw, in addition to being able to shift into an animal form, I've got another gift. I'm, uh, not really supposed to tell anyone but my mate."

He smiled at Max, who smiled back, looking fond.

Catching Tom's eye, Rory clarified, "Even in the magic community, many don't believe in fated mates or soulmates, but I do. And one of the good things that came out of that near disaster was that Max agreed to be mine."

Sam and Edward squeed a little, and Tom's expression softened, though he was still standing to the side of the others.

"I'm sorry if I scared any of you," Rory went on. "And I'm sorry that I had to keep something big from you. I didn't feel like I had a choice. This is something we all learned from the earliest age. We're safe because we're secret."

All of the witches and shifters were nodding along. Tom looked conflicted.

Rory shrugged. "Most people don't deal well with something that's different, and we are very much in the minority. Only the secret is out there now." Rory cleared his throat. "I'm kind of supposed to flee now and leave

you second-guessing yourselves. That's what I did in the past, and that's how some of our myths got started." He reached his hand out for Max, and Max clasped it. "But I'm not about to leave Max, and I'm kind of hoping we'll all get to keep playing D&D together. I realize I'm not exactly who I said I was, but I'm not *not* who I said I was, you know? I hid a part of myself, but the rest is all me."

There was a chorus of agreement from the others, all of whom had been hiding part of themselves from the rest of the group—except for Tom, who was still a totally normal person who'd somehow fallen in with the rest of them. From the look on his face, he still wasn't convinced that he belonged.

David looked like he wanted to explain himself some more, but Max stepped forward before he could, maybe because Tom looked a bit like he was going to bolt.

"Thank you for coming," Max told them all. He pointed at the cluster of four boxes he'd piled on their D&D table. "I'm pretty sure these are the boxes our thief was searching for. So even if he hadn't knocked over that pile of books—thank you, Nōwē—he wouldn't have found them upstairs. But he would likely have done a lot of damage looking. The thief rolled over on the man who was actually behind this, Connor Arnold, but *he* is claiming that these were books that he was trying to get back for sentimental reasons following the death of his father, and the thief totally misunderstood what he'd been tasked to do."

Everyone scoffed or rolled their eyes.

"Alright," Max said. "Everybody take a box. Please treat the books with the respect they deserve. We have no idea what we're looking for, but I hope we'll know it when we see it."

There were double the number of people as boxes, and Tom glared at everyone until they let him have a box of his own. Max, Rory, and Alex ended up sharing a box, then Stella and Sam, and finally David and Edward, though David kept darting desperate glances at Tom.

Since they didn't know what they were looking for, they went through every book one by one. There was a mix of genres and types of books, though most were hardcovers. Nothing looked particularly expensive, though. This wasn't a collection of first editions or anything like that. (Max usually appraised and processed those quickly.) But it was the collection of someone who'd liked books and took good care of them. None of the books looked damaged or dog-eared—there should be a particular place in hell reserved for

people who deliberately damaged books—but some had neat bookplates or inscriptions.

Max said, “It’s been slowly coming back to me since I realized these were the books Connor was after. His sister, Bridget, is the one who dropped the books off. She’s got three kids and lives in a two-bedroom apartment and just didn’t have the space to keep all her dad’s books. She picked a few that meant the most to her but hoped that I’d be able to pass the rest on to someone else who’d love them. Meanwhile, her asshole brother has been harassing me, claiming he’s so attached to these books and they should be his. I know family stuff is complicated, but this guy gave off serious asshole vibes, so I told him to stuff it.”

Rory squeezed his arm. “With some rather unfortunate side effects.”

Max grimaced. “Yeah. But I’m not sure being more polite would have helped any. And honestly, I don’t want somebody who’d hire a thief who’d stab someone in the chest while he was trying to get a book back to get *any books*. It’s maybe not something I would have liked to actually die over, but I’m very glad he didn’t succeed.”

They all murmured an agreement. Rory was *so* glad he’d been there and been able to save his mate. He didn’t want to contemplate what would have happened if they hadn’t met yet. But that was the thing about believing in Magic or Fate or a force like that. Or even just coincidence, he supposed. They *had* met, and Rory *had* been there, and he chose to see that as being exactly what was supposed to happen.

About half of the books in their box looked like they’d been well read, while others looked nearly new. Rory was checking under dust jackets, reading inscriptions, and paging through the books to see if anything fell out. So far, there’d been a couple of bookmarks, but that was it.

Stella and Sam had pulled Edward into a discussion about romantasy versus fantasy with a romantic subplot, and Alex was now reading the back blurbs on some of the books. David was splitting his time between actually looking at his books and watching Tom, who was now looking at his phone. Then Tom looked up, his eyes huge.

“Um, guys,” he said. They all instantly quieted. He held up a lottery ticket. “This was being used as a bookmark. I just looked it up, and it’s a winning ticket.”

Max made a face. “Ugh, the asshole brother must have realized Dad won but couldn’t find the ticket.”

“It’s not signed,” Tom practically whispered. “He could have just taken it, and no one would ever have known.”

Max rolled his eyes. “Good to know my life was worth a lottery ticket.”

Tom cleared his throat. “Well, obviously, your life is precious, but, uh, the ticket is worth ten million dollars.”

Max choked, and the rest of them gaped at one another.

Rory had never played the lottery. He’d never understood the impulse to spend money for the tiny chance that you would get lots of money in return. On the other hand, up until Rory had met Max, he hadn’t had any ties to anywhere, and he always had the option of turning into a bird and surviving that way. Maybe it was different if the ticket felt like your one chance to change your life.

Tom was still holding the ticket like it was a ticking time bomb.

Max started grinning. “I think Bridget is going to be able to move out of the two-bedroom apartment.”

Rory added, “And set up a good education fund for the kids.”

“And get excellent health care,” Alex suggested.

“And probably go on a really good vacation this year.” This from Sam.

“And buy more bookshelves!” Stella said triumphantly.

“And lots of books to fill them,” Edward agreed with a grin.

“Maybe fulfill a few dreams,” David said wistfully.

A small smile had broken out on Tom’s face, too. “And be able to support herself and her kids and hopefully be happy.”

Rory clapped his hands together excitedly. “It’s like finding real-life treasure!”

They all laughed, grinning at one another and feeling more in sync than they had since the whole awkward series of revelations.

Tom gave the ticket to Max, who grimaced at it and said, “Okay, I’ll give Bridget a call to come in, and I’m just going to run this up to the safe upstairs. I know it’s probably fine, but just… no.”

They all nodded their agreement.

As he headed for the stairs, Max asked, “Is that all the books? While we can likely safely assume that’s what the asshole was looking for, I don’t like to leave things up to chance.”

They weren’t quite done with the books, so while Max hid the lottery ticket, they quickly finished up.

As Max returned, Rory said, “I know we could sort these for sale now, but since it’s possible Bridget will have more space soon, what do you say we

box them up again just in case she wants them back?”

Max smiled at him. “Yes, that’s an excellent idea.”

So they repacked the books in their boxes and then set them aside in their own little section.

Then Stella said, “Alright, folks. Time to get this show on the road.”

They all got out their books, dice, minis, and snacks. Tom, in a departure from the usual, had set out his things at the foot of the table, opposite Stella, where Max normally sat. One look at his face said it wouldn’t be a good idea to bring this up, so Max took Tom’s normal seat, and David visibly wilted next to him.

Stella cleared her throat. “Okay, so we’d actually just rolled initiative last time, before real life somehow got more exciting and dangerous than D&D.”

Max snickered, which helped lighten the mood considerably.

“We’re just going to go ahead and do that again since Max is back with us this time,” Stella told them.

They rolled while Stella pointed at Tom and David. “You two are still standing outside of the castle. The guards have just run off to see what these fools are up to. What are you doing?”

David and Tom exchanged fleeting glances, and Rory didn’t think he was the only one holding his breath to see what would happen next.

Clearing his throat, David declared, “Thankfully, I’m a bard from the College of Lore, so I’d like to cast Pass without a Trace on myself and my companion, so that we can sneak into the castle and go find our friends.”

Tom nodded, saying, “They’re obviously in trouble. What else would have caused this alarm? It was probably our rogue. He’s a very cheerful fellow, but his fingers are sticky.”

“Hey!” Edward protested, though he was grinning.

“You’re not there,” Stella reminded him.

“I can feel a disturbance in the Force,” Edward told her.

Stella rolled her eyes. “Uh huh. Okay, while the cleric and the bard sneak into the castle, the rest of you have a more immediate problem, as you have guards and kobolds bearing down on you. Oh, is that a troll? I think it is. And our grumpy wizard is up first.”

Max grinned. It was not a nice smile. “I will be scolding him later, but you really should have just let my friend keep that vase…”



By the time they headed to bed, they'd somehow managed not to die despite Edward's poor impulse control, and they'd even leveled up. Rory was getting better at reading the instructions correctly, but he still checked with Max or one of the others to make sure he hadn't missed anything.

While things hadn't gone back to normal between Tom and the rest of the group, it had felt like tentative peace. Tom still wasn't talking to David, but he hadn't categorically declared he didn't want to see any of them anymore, which was a distinct improvement. Tom's life had been turned upside down, and it was unreasonable of them to expect him to get over it immediately. They wanted him to understand and forgive them, but they needed to make space for him to feel what he was feeling—and potentially never forgive them, if he couldn't get over what they'd hidden.

But he *had* come to the D&D session, and that gave Rory hope. Surely, if he'd been nothing but angry, he wouldn't have bothered?

On Saturday morning, Max made Bridget sign the lottery ticket and then stood there awkwardly while she cried all over him once she realized what she'd won. She cried even harder once she realized Max had kept all of her dad's books.

Rory eventually tugged her away and let her cry over him while Max retreated a safe distance away from all the emotions. He had a little smile on his face, though, and Rory knew he was glad he'd been able to help her out.

After she'd left, Rory asked, "Is her brother going to make trouble?"

Max stared after her. "No doubt, he'd try. But I talked to Rogers this morning, and it's the weirdest thing. He doesn't seem to remember anything about a lottery ticket."

Memory spells, Max had said, were a gray area. Rory leaned over and kissed Max's cheek. He couldn't help but feel that it was the least the man deserved after hiring someone who'd tried to kill Max. That seemed like

justice to him, even if it was something that Max probably wasn't supposed to do.

Life, Rory had learned long ago, was complicated. And there were people who tried to make it better, while others tried to make it worse. Rory was always going to be aligned with the former. And he believed in creative solutions.

It was one of the many things he liked about Max. He wanted to keep people safe and happy—in his own grumpy way—and he didn't seem to be terribly fussed about how he did that.

A ridiculous surge of glee welled up in Rory. He had a mate. They'd bonded, and nothing was ever going to separate them. Rory was going to make absolutely sure of that.

"What are you over there being all gleeful about?" Max asked.

Rory couldn't help but grin as he was reminded of another benefit of the bond.

"I'm just so glad that you picked me and we're bonded, and we're going to be together forever," Rory told him, unable to keep the happiness out of his voice.

Max smiled. "I'm not sure I can totally wrap my brain around that yet, but it *is* pretty amazing. I look forward to everything we discover together."

"Think of how many spells you'll be able to read!" Rory pointed out.

Max blinked at him, and then he let out a bark of laughter. "True. I always said it would take a hundred lifetimes to get through all the spellbooks."

And now they could live those lives together.

Rory couldn't be happier.

The phone rang, and Rory picked it up.

"Read for a Spell, Rory speaking."

"Hello, Rory. It's Peter Holcroft. I was wondering if you and Max would be willing to come out to the house. There's some paperwork relating to Mr. Jones's estate that the lawyer is insisting must be looked at in person."

Oooh, Max was right, there was *definitely* tone when Peter talked about the lawyer. Rory was intrigued. "I'd have to check with Max, but I'm sure that's possible."

Max looked up at his name, an eyebrow raised.

Peter wants to know if we can come out to the house for some legal paperwork.

Max's eyes went wide as saucers, so Rory was pretty sure he'd heard him.

Max cleared his throat. "Uh, when did he have in mind?"

Rory repeated the question.

"I was actually wondering if you were doing anything over Thanksgiving," Peter said. "And if you had any guests you'd like to bring. It seems a shame to drag you out here just for paperwork, but you could look at some books, have a nice meal, and I'm sure we'd get to the paperwork eventually."

Yes, he was definitely engaged in some sort of battle with the lawyer. Rory needed to find out more!

"I'll talk to Max," Rory promised. "I'm sure we'll be able to work something out. I think the shop is usually closed over Thanksgiving anyway."

The eyebrow had risen even higher on Max's face, but he didn't object.

"Wonderful." Peter sounded relieved. "However many people. Whatever time suits you. Just let us know final numbers and times so that we can ensure everything is ready for your arrival. A few days in advance, if you're able. We're all looking forward to seeing you again. Fiona hasn't had much occasion to cook, and she'd like to pull out all the stops."

"Max and I will talk about it and let you know," Rory agreed.

Peter hung up, and Rory stared at the phone for a moment before setting it back down in its cradle.

"I think we might be involved in a war between Peter and the lawyer." Rory looked up at Max. "Is it weird that I'm really invested?"

Max's lip curled up in amusement. "Somehow, it doesn't surprise me. They want us there over Thanksgiving?"

Rory was pretty sure that *Peter* wanted them there over Thanksgiving in the hopes of inconveniencing the lawyer, who was maybe trying to inconvenience *them* by demanding this in-person meeting.

Rory proposed, "We need to go to find out all the details of who is setting up who."

Max was smiling now. "Obviously."

"But we're supposed to invite people. Do you think the D&D folks want to go spend Thanksgiving at a mansion?"

"Fiona Finch is still there, right?" Max asked.

"She wants to do something fancy for us," Rory declared happily.

Max's eyes lit up. "We're definitely going to figure out how to make this happen. And can you imagine playing D&D on that giant table?"

Their lives were never going to be boring, and Rory wouldn't have it any other way.

"It sounds perfect," Rory agreed. He drew a deep breath and let it out, allowing the contentment to settle into the marrow of his bones. "It's been a

long time since I've had so many friends. And books and games. And you. Always you. It's amazing."

"It really is," Max agreed, gazing at him with soft eyes and warm affection pulsing through their bond.

"I love you," Rory told Max. "I'm so glad I found you."

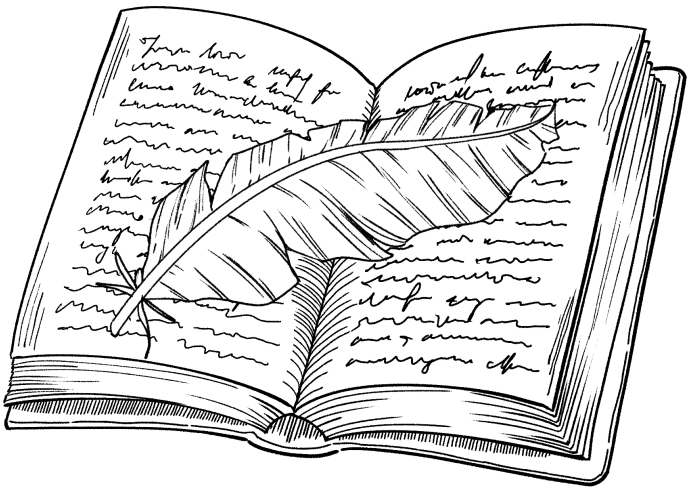
"I'm sorry it took so long," Max apologized.

Rory shook his head. "I'm not. All this time, I was headed towards you. It was definitely worth the wait."

Max sucked in a breath, and Rory could feel how momentarily overwhelmed he was. He swallowed visibly. "There's nowhere I'd rather be. I love you more than I thought possible."

The Magic definitely knew what it was doing, and Rory wouldn't change a thing.

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Epilogue

Thanksgiving

Max could state categorically and without hesitation that he'd never imagined having Thanksgiving in a mansion. But Rory hadn't been the only one curious about whatever was going on between Peter and the lawyer.

Their friends had been curious enough about the whole thing to come as well, and Fiona Finch had jumped at the opportunity to feed them all. Everything had been up in the air since Mr. Jones had died, and Max was happy to provide a happy moment for her if he could. (There was no downside to getting delicious food.)

Alex's mom had to work, and she'd seemed honestly relieved when Max had invited Alex. Max was pretty sure she was treating him and Rory like some kind of honorary uncles at this point. Tom still wasn't fully comfortable with them, but Max was pretty sure he'd been a bit relieved by the invitation. Had he not had anyone to spend Thanksgiving with? Had he not had anyone for years, and if only Max had known, he could have invited him over? He grimaced. But would he have done so? Before Rory, would it even have occurred to him to interrupt his solitude that way?

He looked at David. Now *that* man should have thought to invite Tom to every holiday ever. He still looked miserable. There were dark circles under his eyes, and it looked like he'd lost weight.

It would be wrong of Max to lock them in a room together and see what happened, wouldn't it? Oh, who was he kidding? He'd totally do it… except

it was possible it would make everything worse, and Max didn't want *that*. No need for Tom to feel *more* betrayed.

Ugh. This was why Max had avoided people and emotional tangles. But also… he liked these people, and he wanted to make it better. He was choosing to take it as a positive sign that the World Spell hadn't obscured what had happened. Tom had kept all his memories, so if he was *meant* to know—look at Max, sounding like Rory now!—then he was hopefully meant to stay with them after all.

And hopefully David would soon stop looking like he wasn't eating or sleeping.

Stella and Sam usually celebrated Thanksgiving with Stella's parents, but apparently, everyone had been intrigued by the "weird opportunity to spend Thanksgiving in an old witch's mansion." So that was something. Edward had thought he might not be able to make it, but apparently, things had crashed and burned with his latest girlfriend just in time for him to be single and available for Thanksgiving.

So it sure wasn't sunshine and roses for everyone in the group, but Max had never been happier. He and Rory were *bonded mates*. Rory was his familiar. It was amazing.

And apart from the fact that they were experimenting with wild things like *telepathy* and emotions through the bond, their life hadn't actually changed that much. They already spent most of their time together, and Rory still understood when Max needed a bit of alone time. Max's spell retention had gotten even better, suggesting magic had been involved in his excellent recall. Perhaps it was a factor in being a Spellreader?

Whatever the case, Max was kind of reassured that everything and nothing had changed.

Evie had nearly keeled over in shock when Max had told her that he had plans for Thanksgiving.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

You mean you're not going to sit at home and eat PB&J and grumble at people for being loud?

MAX

I'm going to eat a fabulous turkey dinner and *then* grumble.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

LOL Seriously, though, I'm proud of you. I figured you'd get scared and run, but you didn't.

Max had decided he was definitely *not* explaining the near-death experience to her until they were in person and he could make sure she listened to the whole story.

And she'd forgive him about the bonding as long as he let her host a party or something when she came out, right?

Yeah, it would be fine.

Or Rory would save him.

MAX

Rory's worth it.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

[heart emoji x1000]

You're so cute when you're in love.

MAX

I'm canceling your visit.

MOST ANNOYING SIBLING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD

Too late. I already have my ticket. And nothing in the world will stop me from meeting Rory.

Max still wasn't sure he one hundred percent believed in fate, but he believed Evie was right about that. Possibly there was nothing *but* fate that had led to Max sitting with his bonded mate at a gigantic dining room table in a huge house… with his D&D crew, because that was obviously how he rolled.

Plus, there was Peter Holcroft, who also looked a little thinner and paler since Mr. Jones's passing. Trevelyan Abercrombie, the lawyer, rounded out the group. He gave off a distinct buzz of magic, strong enough that Max thought he was probably a witch. He looked like he was in his early thirties with slicked-back dark hair, cool gray eyes, and a supercilious sneer whenever he looked at Peter—who glared at him—or Max, who also had no problem glaring back, since he had no idea what the man's problem was.

There’d been enough snide comments when they arrived to make clear that the man wasn’t impressed with needing to be here over Thanksgiving, but how was that Max’s fault? Maybe people who billed by the minute had a different relationship with reality.

That seemed likely.

Max was planning his life going forward with as few lawyers as possible. The food, at least, was incredibly delicious. Mrs. Finch and Mrs. Davenport had declined to eat dinner with them in the dining room but assured Max they would have their own lovely meal. Max had wondered if it was some sort of class/employee thing, but now he suspected that they’d just been done with the glaring and snark. Rory was eyeing Peter and Trevelyan like they were a show put on just for him, his eyes alight with interest.

“This is the best meal ever!” Rory whispered excitedly to Max, managing to stare at the two of them unblinkingly while unerringly directing food to his mouth.

His plate was covered with a small portion of every single menu item that had been provided on the buffet. Max would *not* have wanted to put all those food combinations together, but the hot sauce/bird seed incidents had made it plain that they didn’t have the same taste buds.

Everyone was complimentary about the food and took several helpings. Edward went back at least four times, and Stella and Sam traded things from plate to plate almost constantly as they encouraged one another to try another delicious morsel.

This lightness wove through the awkward silences, the catty comments between Peter and the lawyer, and the weird vibe going around otherwise.

David, unfortunately, mostly pushed food around on his plate, but Max noticed Tom dart glances at him now and again, which was an improvement from the last time he’d seen them together.

“Are we still playing D&D after dinner?” Alex asked at one point.

Trevelyan’s utensils clinked loudly as he put them down and began to protest, “Now, really—”

Peter rode over him like he hadn’t even spoken. “Of course! I imagine you don’t often get to play on a table like this.”

“I must insist—“ Trevelyan tried again.

Peter’s look was acid. “On a statutory holiday? Planning to bill the estate double time and a half?”

Gray eyes narrowed. “*You*’re the one who insisted—”

“—on a pleasant meal for our guests before all the dry paperwork that I’m sure there’s time for tomorrow,” Peter said smoothly.

“I’d hardly call them guests,” Trevelyan said dryly.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Max demanded.

The food was lovely, but he wasn’t going to sit here and have his friends be insulted just because they didn’t have the same sort of… of *pedigree* or whatever this guy’s problem was.

Peter practically snarled, “To. Mor. Row. We will talk about this *tomorrow*, after everyone’s had an enjoyable evening tonight. I insist.”

Now everyone’s eyes were ping-ponging back and forth between the two of them as the tension ratcheted up another notch.

One of Trevelyan’s perfectly groomed eyebrows rose. “Oh, you insist, do you?”

Peter’s gaze was stony as he bit out the word, “Yes.”

Max wasn’t sure if he needed to prepare a shield spell. He would have said the idea was ludicrous, but it felt more and more like they might be enacting a real battle in the dining room at any moment.

He really didn’t need reality to keep mimicking D&D. He was happy with a story, thank you very much.

All of a sudden, the lawyer’s face relaxed into a broad smile—that didn’t reach his eyes for so much as a second.

“By all means,” he said, voice excessively congenial. “We’ll talk about this tomorrow.” He carefully laid his snowy white cloth napkin beside his half-finished plate as he rose to his feet. “I find that I’ve had my fill today. Goodnight.”

The polite members of the group—Rory, Tom, and David—bid him goodnight, and the rest of them just stared at the man as he sauntered out of the room as though he hadn’t a care in the world.

It made it hard to feel like he’d been routed, and Peter’s glower said he had the same doubt. Now it felt like the man had left because he *wanted* to.

“Bloodsucking leech,” Peter muttered angrily.

Apparently, he was louder than he’d intended, because when they all turned to look at him, his cheeks and ears went faintly red.

He cleared his throat. “Sorry about that. But I daresay the meal will be more pleasant now that he’s gone.”

Not even Max was rude enough to point out that fifty percent of the bad behavior had been from Peter. The man had recently lost an employer who’d

clearly been more than a job, and he'd been dealing with the lawyer longer than any of them. Max assumed he had a reason for acting this way.

There was a moment of silence, where no one seemed to know what to say, and then Rory piped up with, "What's for dessert?"

There was a ripple of groans and laughter around the table, and they all relaxed again.



It wasn't until the next morning that Max learned how messed up the whole situation was. After an evening D&D session and then a pleasant night cuddling with his mate, the two of them had convened early in the morning to meet with Peter and the lawyer. They were gathered in Mr. Jones' study, rather than his library, although it, too, had several shelves lined with books. There was dark wood paneling and dark curtains, along with a massive unlit fireplace. The room didn't feel as welcoming as the library, and Max wondered how much time Mr. Jones had actually spent there.

He also wondered if they were meeting there because Peter had taken the opportunity to sit behind the desk so that Trevelyan was forced to face him in one of the chairs opposite.

But none of that mattered when balanced against what the disgruntled lawyer relayed to Max.

"He did *what*?" Max hadn't realized he could hit that pitch.

With cool poise, the lawyer repeated the news that Mr. Jones hadn't just left Max the spellbooks, he'd left him *the house, the grounds, and a trust to manage all of them.*

Peter pointed out, "You wanted to make spells freely available to the public. You now have the space and funds to do that."

Max couldn't decide if that was true or ridiculous.

"How convenient that you convinced a dying old man to part with all his wealth and possessions to achieve your goals," Trevelyan said silkily. "Why,

it’s almost like someone in a position of trust took advantage of him.”

Peter burst out of his seat with a clatter of falling chair and the preternatural speed of a shifter, around the desk in an instant. The air crackled as Trevelyan raised his hands to cast… and Rory was suddenly there, between them.

Max sucked in a breath. He hadn’t even seen his mate move.

Rory’s hand was planted on Peter’s chest, but his gaze was directed at Trevelyan. Max had never seen that expression on his face before. There was no trace of playfulness or cheerfulness.

His voice was low and intense as he said, “You should not speak about things you do not understand. Mr. Jones was so very old. He was tired and ready to move on. He was hanging on by a thread, waiting for the right person who could carry on his legacy. He was waiting for a Spellreader with impeccable integrity, and he found it in Max.”

Trevelyan had gone pale, but he said with a credible semblance of calm, “He changed his will three weeks before he died.”

“Because that was when he met Max in person and knew his quest was at an end,” Rory said lightly.

“It was an impulsive decision,” Trevelyan argued.

“Or,” Rory proposed smoothly, “a decision made with a lifetime’s experience and an awareness that time was short.”

Thin-lipped with disapproval, the lawyer began, “He should have consulted __”

Peter interrupted. He still looked furious, but it was more controlled now. “Mr. Jones never consulted anyone a day in his life. He knew what he wanted, and he set out to get it. That didn’t change just because he got older.” With his own sneer, he added, “If you’d been his lawyer for more than five minutes, you’d know that.”

Now, Rory looked back at Peter. “And are *you* going to judge people for their age, and blame them for things they couldn’t possibly have experienced?”

Peter drew a deep breath and then expelled it in a rush. “I suppose that wasn’t fair.”

It certainly wasn’t an apology. It wasn’t gracious, and it wasn’t directed at Trevelyan, but the man relaxed slightly just the same. Max didn’t know how long Peter had been Mr. Jones’s secretary—companion?—but it was apparently causing friction with the new lawyer.

In the tone of someone who wasn’t very good at olive branches, Trevelyan offered, “My father did always say that Mr. Jones did whatever he wanted.”

Peter’s lips tipped up into something that was almost a smile, though his eyes were sad. Max recognized that look from after his parents had died. Memories that both cheered and flattened you.

“That is very true,” Peter agreed. “And what he wanted was for Max to make good use of his spellbooks. It’s impractical for them to be housed in Max’s small bookshop. And Mr. Jones was well aware that this place requires tremendous upkeep and would be impossible to maintain without dedicated funds. Funds also enable ongoing purchases, and Mr. Jones expects that Max will continue to acquire spellbooks.”

Max narrowed his eyes at Peter. “I get the feeling there was a lot you two didn’t say at my last visit.”

It had been clear he was being tested, and he’d been just naive enough to think he knew about what.

There was another ghost of a smile on Peter’s face. “What can I say? You impressed him.”

Max scoffed a disgusted sound, and Rory stifled a laugh.

“I can feel a headache coming on already.” Max sounded fed up. “What does this mean, practically speaking? I own a bookshop.”

Rory laid a reassuring hand on his arm. “And no one is asking you to give it up. But perhaps we can move to a model where you aren’t there as often. We already started talking about it.”

That was true from back when he’d thought he’d just be visiting Mr. Jones’s collection.

“There’s no timeline,” Peter said. Trevelyan opened his mouth, but Peter glared at him until he closed it again. “Of course, the sooner the work begins, the faster progress will be, but there are no hard and fast requirements set by the will. The trust is managed by me, Trevelyan Abercromie, you, and Rory.”

Max groaned and asked plaintively, “Why is Mr. Jones doing this to me?”

“Decisions are by simple majority, unless the money involved is in excess of a million dollars, and then unanimity is required,” Peter continued.

Max choked on air. “Why would we be making decisions about more than a million dollars?”

Rory clapped his hands together. “I’ve never been in charge of money before. This sounds like fun!”

Trevelyan muttered something that was probably not complimentary, but they all pretended not to hear.

“This sounds like a massive headache,” Max grumbled.

Rory nudged him. “But you get to work with spells all the time. You get to label them and protect people and make spells available to them just the way you wanted.”

Max sighed. It was kind of exactly what he wanted; he hadn’t imagined it becoming available to him in this way. There was a little ember of excitement burning in his gut, but he didn’t think the headache aspect should be discounted.

Still, it was an opportunity he was unlikely to have achieved on his own. In addition to being annoyed, he was flattered that Mr. Jones had thought so highly of him.

“I *am* looking forward to cataloguing the spellbooks,” Max conceded with poor grace.

Rory beamed.

“Speaking of the spellbooks, there’s one in particular that Mr. Jones would like you to look at now.” Peter eyed them with what Max could only consider *significance.*

Trevelyan was looking between them. “There’s no additional bequest in the will.”

Peter gave him a dismissive look. “This book belongs to the two of them. Mr. Jones already gave it to them.”

The lawyer’s brow furrowed. “That is irregular.”

Peter’s look turned scathing. “Irregular that a man chose to give a book to a colleague?”

Glowering, Trevelyan said, “Then why is it here?”

“Because this was a safe space to store it,” Peter said simply.

“Perhaps I should—” the lawyer started.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Peter said in a tone of voice that made it clear he wasn’t the slightest bit sorry, “but you don’t have access to the area where the spellbooks are stored. You won’t be able to look. Such a shame.”

Trevelyan’s eyes narrowed, but he seemed to decide after a moment not to argue with Peter at this time.

It may have helped that Rory cheerfully pointed out, “He really did give it to us. We’re looking forward to taking a look at it! Spellbooks are so interesting. Even when you’re a shifter and can’t actually read them or use them. Don’t you think it’s interesting that witches figured out how to record their spells, even when they can’t all read them?”

Looking taken aback by the question, Trevelyan ventured after a moment, “Uh, yes, of course.”

Rory beamed at him. “Shifters write things down, too, of course, but all of our magic is innate. I feel like I’ve learned more by oral tradition, but I don’t suppose that’s the norm now.”

Peter’s expression had softened looking at Rory. “There was a lot of book learning for me.”

“Books are the best invention!” Rory enthused. “Just think about how much knowledge they contain.”

The Gutenberg Press had certainly changed the world.

“Let’s take this to the library, shall we?” Peter said briskly.

Mostly so he could leave Trevelyan in the study, if Max judged correctly. Should he be giving them both points for digging in? Since he was now apparently in charge of a trust with them, he was pretty sure they would irritate him to no end.

But for now, Max really did want to know about the book that Mr. Jones had given to them.

He was going to be so disappointed if it turned out to not be worth all this hype.

Trevelyan let them go graciously, though his narrowed gaze suggested this was simply to prevent Peter from feeling he’d got the upper hand.

Yeah, trustee meetings with these two were going to be a barrel of laughs.

In the library, Peter and Max let Rory open the secret entrance because he was obviously going to get the most enjoyment out of it. Seeing his face light up was more than worth it.

Max still felt the tingle of the wards as they went through them, but the transfer had worked correctly, and the three of them were safe to enter even after Mr. Jones’s death.

Peter made sure that they could successfully retrieve the bundle from the hidden compartment and then retreated.

“It’s meant for you, not for me,” he told them.

Rory’s eyes were practically glowing with excitement. “It’s like finding real live treasure again! We’re so lucky!”

Max could only smile helplessly at him. It hit him like a bolt out of the blue that Rory would be happy no matter what they found. He lived more in the moment and for the experience than anyone Max knew.

“Yeah,” Max said softly. “We really are.”

He could no longer imagine what his life would be like without this particular man in it.

Carefully, Max unknotted the fabric that was swaddling their book. He carefully unwrapped what proved to be less book and more box, about a foot square, dark wood practically vibrating with spells, silky smooth and glossy. One was etched into the top of the box, swirling across the whole surface, and Max sucked in a sharp breath as he read it.

"What is it?" Rory asked.

"The box can only be opened by a Spellreader and a shifter of legend, which I assume means a mythical shifter like you. I think Mr. Jones really was waiting for us."

That Magic Rory talked about with a capital M? Yeah, maybe that really was a thing.

"How do we open it?" Rory asked, eyes big and round and sparkling with joy.

"It should open for us," Max told him. "I think we both try to take the lid off."

The spell had some harrowing consequences for those who *weren't* a Spellreader and a mythical shifter, but since they both fit the bill, there was really no need to worry, right?

Rory settled his hands on the box, on the two sides Max wasn't holding.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," Max confirmed.

They both tugged upward, and sure enough, the lid lifted as though there was no impediment.

Inside were unbound pieces of paper, square like the box. They had thick ink etched across them… in a completely incomprehensible array. They weren't spells, just short, abstract lines.

Max pulled out one sheet and then another and another. The paper was old. It looked like it may have been handmade, although it was incredibly well-preserved, and Max assumed there'd been other spells on the box and/or the paper.

He turned the papers every which way and then handed a few to Rory, who looked at them with keen interest.

Max couldn't deny feeling disappointed. He'd assumed there'd be important spells in here. He'd been ready to begin cataloguing, to marvel at something, and instead… abstract art?

And then Rory tilted his head, narrowing his eyes a little. He reached out and traced one edge of a page.

"This says 1." He tapped another edge. "This says 2."

Max blinked, frowned, and peered more closely at the papers.

"No, it doesn't."

Rory argued, "Yes, it does." He considered for a moment. "I wonder if only mythical shifters can see it. Or birds. Birds have more cones in their eyes."

"But you're not a bird right now," Max pointed out.

Rory shrugged. "I'm always a bird. Sometimes I also look like one."

Max supposed that Rory *did* always talk like that. His eyes went back to the pages. More than one number on each page…

"Do any of them have numbers on all four edges?" he asked.

Rory took a quick look, and then confirmed in growing excitement. "Yes. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that they connect together. This one that only has it on two sides is a top corner. Or a bottom corner, I suppose, if we've got it upside down."

Rory was grinning now, his enthusiasm infectious. "Can we put it together?"

Nothing was going to stop them, honestly. Except… they probably didn't have room in here.

"We're going to have to do it somewhere else," Max told Rory.

"There's a ballroom," Rory suggested eagerly. "Mrs. Davenport said it hasn't been used in years. So it's big and empty!"

That did sound like the perfect place. Had Mr. Jones known what he had? Or was a house of this size simply able to provide whatever it was that they needed?

They put all the papers back, resealed the box, and tied it in its wrapping. Max hoped they weren't going to be let down again, but he felt the need to be careful as well. This had been very well hidden, and maybe it hadn't been for the world's most annoying joke.

They were able to emerge into the library, and sure enough, no one was in there to prevent the secret panel from opening. Max would have to give some thought to how that would work if there were eventually more of them here actually cataloguing or using the books. The secret repository was the coolest, but it wasn't necessarily practical when you weren't a rich dude who owned everything and didn't let people visit.

Well, that was a worry for another time.

For now, they needed the ballroom.

"I think it's over here!" Rory told Max, practically skipping along the corridor in his excitement. "Mrs. Davenport mentioned it gets lots of southern

light at the back of the house."

Max had no idea when Rory had had this conversation, but it didn't really surprise him that the man was making all these connections.

He followed in Rory's wake, and after only three false turns and a point at which Max thought they were hopelessly lost, Rory opened yet another set of doors to reveal a cavernous room.

Max assumed the cleaning spells were top-notch here, because the space looked entirely dust-free and didn't have the smell of disuse that he'd expect from a room that was rarely used.

The ceiling soared above them, with an absurd number of chandeliers affixed to it. Thankfully, the wall opposite them was nearly floor-to-ceiling windows, so there was enough light they didn't need to mess with either chandeliers or spells.

The walls were papered in something with lots of ornate gold, and there was crown molding and decorative flourishes everywhere. There was even a musicians' gallery looking out over the room, like that was a normal house feature these days.

The floor looked like it was made of actual marble, and Max decided he simply wouldn't think about how much that cost—or the fact that it sort of belonged to him now, or would when all the paperwork was done.

Not important right now.

Instead, Max turned to Rory. "Want to see what we can make?"

Rory's grin was huge. "I sure do!"

They opened the box again and pulled out the whole stack of paper this time. It was a lot. Max was pretty sure there'd been more spells on the box that had helped keep the papers compressed as well as preserved.

Rory was the only one who could read where the papers went, and they were out of order, which Max would have been inclined to be upset about, but he supposed if someone had just put them in order, then they'd be easier to put together. They wouldn't need Rory and his mythical-ness or his bird eyeballs or whatever it was that allowed him to read the placement instructions.

It was a lot like trying to put a puzzle together without the box or the slightest idea what the image was. It was both incredibly irritating and something of an irresistible challenge.

They soon worked out that they should leave gaps between the pieces for them to walk along while they continued to place the papers—because once Rory told Max the numbers, he could at least help with the placement. It

involved a lot of thumbing through the large stack of papers and pulling one out here and there to keep building out the puzzle.

Max supposed he should be grateful that they'd put the first piece on top, or it might have taken them ages to figure out what they were supposed to do.

His excitement began to grow in direct proportion to their progress. They worked out it was fifty squares wide and fifty squares long. (Rory had had the idea to look for blank edges so that they could essentially find the border of the puzzle.)

They filled more and more squares in, matching up the number on one piece to the number on the one that went next to it, and ensuring that it matched its neighbors on the other edges.

They lost complete track of the time, but even if the light had begun to grow a little pinker, it was still daylight when they finished.

Had they said they were going to play D&D today? Oh, dear. That might have to be tomorrow. They weren't heading home until Sunday, and hopefully the others had found something to do without them. Mrs. Finch wouldn't have let them starve. At the thought of food, Max's stomach rumbled, but he didn't have time for that right now.

Because with everything laid out, Max could see how the ink connected. As unbelievable as it was, this looked like a spell. A *giant* spell. Max couldn't read it because it still had the gaps between the pieces—and it was impossible to take it all in from this close.

He glanced up at that useless musicians' gallery.

Touché, Mr. Jones. Maybe I really do need this ridiculous house.

Rory grinned at him. "Time to push it together, right?"

"Yes," Max agreed, excitement pulsing through him.

Whatever this was, he had never seen anything like it before.

They shifted the first row together from the top, then stepped into the narrow path below the second row and shifted it up and over to match the first row—and on and on and on, until all the pieces of paper were flush against one another.

It was *definitely* a spell, but Max still couldn't read it from this close.

"Musicians' gallery?" Rory asked.

"Musicians' gallery," Max agreed.

Rory bolted, and Max rushed after him. His legs might be longer, but he couldn't match Rory's speed. (Rory also couldn't read the spell. There was no *reason* for him to be trying to get up there first. But he was laughing

gleefully, and Max found amusement bubbling out of him, too. His life would never be boring with Rory, and he wouldn't have it any other way.)

They thundered up the narrow stairs at what would probably be considered a reckless speed, but they made it to the top unscathed. Rory had turned back to grin at Max and wasn't even looking down at the spell. He held out his hand, and Max took it, allowing Rory to pull him closer to the balcony edge.

"Ready?" Rory asked.

"Ready."

They both looked down.

There was a moment where Max was simply staring at approximately 2500 pieces of paper that had been pushed next to one another… and then he was reading a spell.

It exploded across his brain like it had been catapulted there, and he couldn't stifle a gasp.

Rory's hand clenched on his. "What is it? Are you alright?"

Max wasn't entirely sure that he *was* alright. He was also reasonably certain that if he and Rory weren't bonded, he might not have been able to handle all this data.

"Holy shit," Max breathed.

This wasn't *a* spell. It was *the* spell. This was the World Spell. With this, they could theoretically try to design an updated spell that took human technological advancements into consideration, could cast it again and thus re-power it so that it could last centuries more.

At this point, Max didn't even consider if they *should*. The number of events that had occurred to bring the two of them here right now, when everyone knew that the World Spell was struggling? He was a convert. He believed in fate or Magic or whatever.

He turned to Rory. "We need to find a Spellsmith. A decent one."

Max would just have to hope that Magic was willing to lend a hand again, because that might be a tall order.



Not quite ready to let Max and Rory go? Sign up to Ellie's newsletter for a bonus scene.

Ready to meet a Spellsmith? Read Ever and George's story in *The Spellsmith and the Dragon*.



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The Spellsmith and the Dragon

Celebrations with Mythical Mates 3

Can a happily ever after start with an overheard conversation?

Ever

This year, Ever has a plan to prevent his parents' misguided matchmaking over Christmas, and to act as a buffer against their never-ending attempts to try to turn him into the loyal son they want, one who will treat creating spells the same way they do, like an elite calling. It's a great plan… until the friend he's roped into being his fake date gets snowed in halfway across the country. Desperate to avoid yet another uncomfortable family holiday where his relatives pretend that he's neither ace nor biromantic, he doesn't ask too many questions when a stranger shows up and offers to be his fake date. What he doesn't expect is how drawn he is to the shifter. But can George accept him as he is?

George

When George overhears Ever in distress, he only knows that he needs to help. As soon as he sees him, he knows that he's found his mate. He's willing to do anything—including pretending to be his mate's boyfriend and dealing with his awful family—to give Ever the chance to get to know him

and hopefully decide that he’d like to change pretend to real. Oh, and if George gets the chance to teach a few family members a lesson along the way? Sign him up.

The Spellsmith and the Dragonis an MM urban fantasy romance novel. It features an ace witch who’s had more than enough of his family’s bad behavior and a dragon whose only wish is to make his mate’s life better. It’s low-angst and low spice. It can be read as a standalone, but for the most enjoyment, the series should be read in order.

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Author's Note

As an ace person myself, positive representation of ace spectrum people is so important to me. My first two series depict allosexual MCs, and I'm very excited to bring some ace spectrum rep to this series. I hope I adequately depicted one possible demi experience for someone who's grumpy, introverted, and has been hiding from most people for most of his life.

In theory, Max could have become attracted to anyone he formed a close emotional bond with, but he didn't give himself the opportunity to do that before; Rory is the first—and in this fated mate universe, will be the last. This is absolutely not meant to depict an ace person suddenly wanting sex with "the right person." (Although plenty of ace people do choose to have sex with their partners, and that's great, too!)

Asexuality is a big, beautiful spectrum, and this is intended to reflect one possible demi experience (in an urban fantasy setting).

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And thanks to *you*, dear reader. This book wouldn't be here without you! If you enjoyed it, please consider rating or reviewing on the site of your choice to help spread the word to others. This really helps out indie authors like me. :)

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The Spellsmith and the Dragon

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About the Author

Ellie has had a life-long love affair with books. A proud Canadian who lives in Ottawa, she graduated from university with an English Literature Bachelors and Masters—as well as an avid appreciation for MM romance thanks to all the slash fanfiction she read and wrote. Around 2021, she realized that the kind of MM romance she enjoys was now being traditionally and indie published, and she has not looked back.

From devouring ARCs to betaing and editing while writing in her spare time, Ellie was inspired by a reader and writer conference in 2024 to take the plunge and put some of her own stories out in the world. In her spare time, she reads, writes, plays D&D, and pursues other geeky interests.

Receive updates and free content by joining her mailing list, and check her out on her website ellieashauthor.com.

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