

ADENASHIRE: BOOK FOUR
A COZY FANTASY BOOK SERIES

A FELLOWSHIP OF CURSES & CATS

J. PENNER

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CURSES OR CATS

ADENASHIRE: BOOK FOUR

J. PENNER

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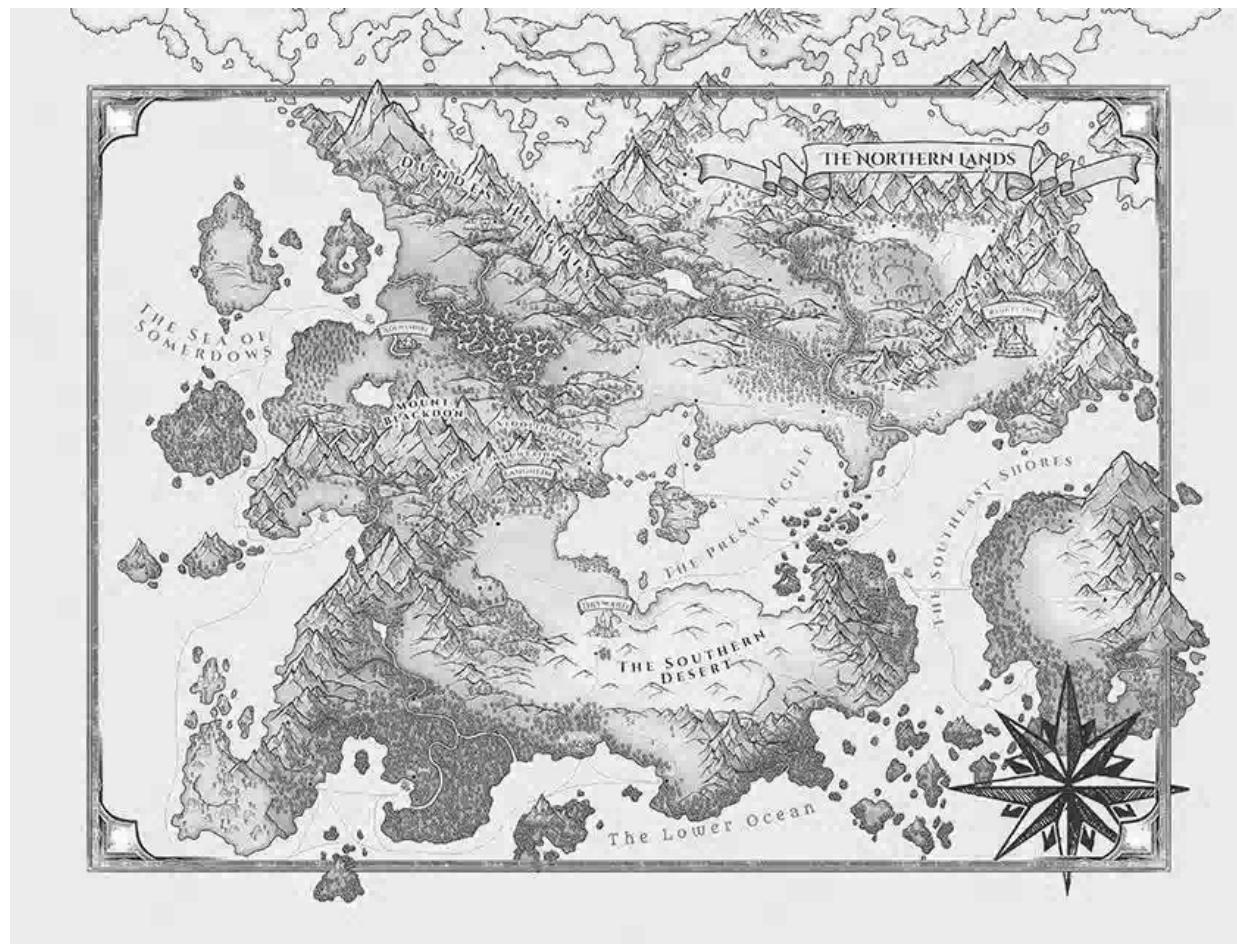
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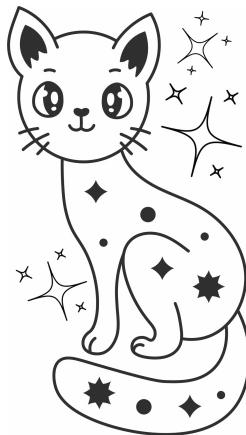
To all the cats I've loved before—
the only heaven I truly long for is connected to a rainbow bridge.
And to Blanco. Thank you for being my real life Faylin.

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CHAPTER ONE



Caught in his own world, Theo Brylar gazed up over Adenashire's thatched rooftops. As it often was, the sky was bright blue with only a scattering of white, puffy clouds to break up the color. Shops bustled with morning customers, some haggling on little things like apples or candle-making supplies to get a better price.

As he walked, a satchel flung over his shoulder, the fragrance of yeasty fresh-baked bread wafted from a half-open cottage window. Star jasmine vines climbed the house walls and framed the window with their white, star-like blooms. Theo inhaled the sweet, nearly ambrosial scent and closed his eyes for a moment to take it in.

Everything was perfect, just as it should be in this small town in the Northern Lands.

At least it would have been if the woodland elf's hands weren't quivering, green and gold magic sparkling from his fingertips despite all the surrounding perfection.

He made a fruitless attempt to banish this anxious reaction, clenching and unclenching his hands several times as he ambled toward *A Little Dash of Magic Bakeshop*. Theo was planning to meet up with Arleta Starstone, the bakery's half owner—and more importantly, his beloved Fated and the mother of his future child.

Future child. Theo was going to be a father in a few months.

Of course he'd been overjoyed about the news, but lately the thought of it had lain like a stack of bricks on his chest. To make matters worse, the very existence of his uncertainty increased the pressure. After all, having a family was quite literally a dream come true ever since he'd seen Arleta in his dreams for years before finding her.

Theo had finally met Arleta while delivering an invitation to her for the one hundredth Langheim Baking Battle. The moment he saw her, he knew she was the one. He'd been searching the Northern Lands under the guise of delivering the invitations to please his mother, who had arranged and judged the event for many years.

The biggest surprise was that Arleta was human. He hadn't seen that coming in his dreams since they were much more about the connection of souls, rather than looks. It was almost unheard of for a human to compete in the Battle, much less to be Fated to an elf.

None of that mattered to Theo. The love of a lifetime overtook him when he first laid eyes on her, and he'd been determined to win her heart. After all, as a human Arleta knew nothing about that elf Fated business.

(The whole story is well worth the telling, but it's a little long to recount here.)

In the end everything worked out the way it was supposed to. Now, just over a year later, Arleta was pregnant with his child and they were living their happily ever after, along with the dearest group of friends they could wish for. They included a fashionable dwarf with tea magic and her studious gargoyle fiancé, two overprotective orc dads, an entirely too grumpy but always loyal fennex, and her elven girlfriend who was also Arleta's business partner at the bakery.

The memories spun in Theo's mind until his brown leather boot caught on something. This fumble nearly sent the elf face-first to the ground, but he caught and righted himself just in time.

"Oh, stars!" Theo cursed under his breath and looked back at the cobblestones, not one of which appeared loose or out of place. More magic glimmered from his hands and floated into the air, dissipating as it drifted away.

A halfling woman with coily hair slowed her steps and raised a dark brow at Theo. His cheeks flushed though she said nothing, merely clutching her woven shopping basket close to her ample bosom and moving on.

“You’ve been with her for over a year, Theo,” said Faylin with a slight growl in his tone. “One would think you’d have gotten ahold of yourself by now.”

The heat of a blush bloomed up the elf’s cheeks and down the back of his neck from the statement. Theo had nearly forgotten that his friend, a sturdy forest lynx, was with him.

What Faylin said was true. Theo was still constantly distracted by the thought of Arleta, and his nature magic sometimes reacted when he thought about her. But his current state of mind was causing more than the usual. He kept hoping it would go away on its own, so he hadn’t talked to anyone about it.

Even Faylin.

Theo gazed down at the lynx. The luxurious brown striped fur on his back was slightly fluffed, and his black tail with a barely-there matching pattern swished behind him. Theo had found him as a kit abandoned in the woods and took him in, fully intending to release him back into the wild once the lynx was rehabilitated. But Faylin had other plans—as cats often do. He’d claimed Theo as “his elf” and had been his near-constant companion ever since.

Theo didn’t mind.

He leaned down slightly to stroke the lynx’s head, running his fingers over the small, curling horns. Instantly the emotional pressure lightened. Faylin had that effect on him. Unfortunately the calm never lasted long.

“It’s not that,” Theo finally replied, a sigh in his tone.

A squint pulled at Faylin’s eyelids as if the lynx was searching Theo for a beat before he held up his pink nose and sniffed the air, whiskers twitching. “Then what is it?”

Immediately the weight on Theo’s chest returned and he blew out a long, intentional breath in a failed attempt to regain his composure. He didn’t answer since if he told the lynx the truth, Theo would likely be in for an admonishment for waiting so long.

Faylin stopped and sat.

Reluctantly Theo stopped as well and turned, sighing. He crossed his arms, really not wanting to put his troubles out in the world by voicing them.

Seemingly unbothered, Faylin tipped his head, twitching his left tufted ear. His back end didn’t budge.

Theo relented and ran his fair-colored hand through his blond hair, stalling for one last moment before the words spilled out. “Everything is supposed to be perfect. I found my Fated . . . we’re expanding the bakery . . . we’re having a baby.” He threw his hands helplessly out to his sides. “Life is grand.”

Tipping his head the other way, Faylin flicked his tail, still quite unbothered. “And?”

After an uncomfortable—at least on Theo’s end—measure of silence between them, the elf swallowed hard at the lump building in his throat. “And I’m scared, but I don’t want Arleta to find out.” The truth tumbled out, and Theo immediately wanted to stuff it back where it had come from.

Faylin’s mouth stretched into a wide, bored yawn as if his jaw had a hinge. His sharp teeth glistened in the sun until he snapped his mouth closed. “There it is. Confession is good for the soul.”

Frustration brewed in Theo’s stomach like a nearly overboiling pot. “Did you already know and just let me suffer all this time?”

The lynx sniffed the air again in Theo’s direction. “I suspected as much. Your scent has been a little off as of late.”

Theo furrowed his flaxen brows. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“It’s always better when people admit to their own issues,” Faylin mused as he stood. “It’s rarely as easy as calling someone out, then expecting them to solve their problems.”

Theo eyed the lynx with the slightest faux contempt. “Well, a little support never hurt anyone, either.” The admission had brightened his mood. A little.

“You always have my support, elf,” Faylin said. He drew up his white paw as if to start walking but then turned his head to Theo. “Who would feed me if you expired from stress?”

A smile twisted Theo’s lips at his friend’s audacity. “Yes. However would you live?”

“Glad we’re on the same page. Although I suppose Arleta would fill the role sufficiently if the worst were to come true.” Faylin purred and ambled forward. “Now, would you like some advice?”

Theo rolled his eyes and trotted to catch up with his friend. “Why not?” He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear it but had to admit the lynx’s opinion was usually good. And he was willing to entertain taking it.

“Maybe it’s time to head over to *Spells and Sortilege* and inquire if they have something to take the edge off,” the lynx advised.

The spell shop wasn’t far from the bakery, but Theo had planned to go straight home to do a few household chores, including cleaning out Nimbus’s horse stall and watering all his indoor plants. Then dinner needed to be made. Still, the idea didn’t seem *entirely* terrible.

“I was really hoping to handle it on my own,” Theo said in a low tone. “Really, I just need to do a bit more of my breathing exercises.”

Over the years, Theo had developed coping strategies to deal with his anxiety. Slow, deliberate breathing, journalling—though he hadn’t done that in a long time—and getting out into nature usually did the trick. Not that day, though. And not for a while, if he was honest.

“Breathing is very good,” Faylin agreed. “Perhaps something from the spell shop would help too.” He shook his head. “But I can’t make the choice for you.”

Theo twisted his lips again as the bakery came into sight. “I’ll think about it.” Relief would have been nice, he had to admit.

“Good idea,” Faylin said and picked up his pace. “Now, I’m hungry.”

Lovely aromas of baking bread, tangy fruit and a hint of herbs met Theo’s nose and he sped up as well, hoping to sample Arleta’s fresh offerings. As he passed the window displaying colorful pastries and cookies, he spotted Arleta and her business partner Taenia Carralei behind the counter, helping a customer.

Faylin nosed the door’s edge, but since it opened outward, the action only served to tell Theo to hurry.

Which the elf did. Not so much for the lynx but to assuage his heart, which fluttered at the sight of his Fated. Arleta’s long chestnut hair was curled up into a messy bun atop her head and her cheeks were pink, likely from working.

For a blink Theo forgot all about his troubles and the thought of going to the spell shop.

She was the sexiest thing he’d ever known. That morning, she’d left him in bed to enjoy a few more minutes of sleep after sunrise. In his sleepy, bed-headed state, she’d kissed him goodbye before leaving to open the bakery.

“You’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen,” Theo had murmured before she had a chance to turn for the door, the bedsheet still pulled up over his chest.

“You’re ridiculous,” Arleta had answered, though the grin on her plump lips told him she loved the sentiment. She ran one hand over her slightly growing stomach, smoothing the fabric of the daisy-patterned dress he loved. “My body is already changing.” Her voice had a tinge of distress at the edges.

“Yes,” Theo had mused, slightly more awake at that point. “Your body is my favorite . . . changed or otherwise.”

“And what of my mind?” Arleta raised her brow to match her question.

Theo had grinned. “My double favorite.”

“Good answer,” Arleta had said as she turned to leave. “Love you.”

He had drifted off for at least another half hour of dreams. Until he woke with a start, anxiety twisting in his chest over his and Arleta’s rapidly changing world.

Theo flung open the bakery door, ringing the bell, and allowed Faylin to enter. The cat made a beeline for the bowl at the back of the shop that was already stocked with several baked goods. As soon as the elf stepped in, the aromas he’d smelled outside increased threefold and his eyes dropped to the iced iweocot rosemary buns proudly displayed on the bakery counter. A small chalkboard sign read “Daily Special” and included the description and price per bun and per dozen underneath.

Arleta had been working on the recipe for several weeks, using the harvest from the tree in their garden. All due to her newest craving for the fruit hailing from Langheim, and Theo had been the primary taste tester. He really liked the lightly sweetened, slightly tart and herby creation. Most of the iterations she’d produced had been entirely delicious. The rest were just *mostly* delicious.

He locked eyes with his Fated, and she gave him a quick wink before returning to help a hairy minotaur complete their order.

Something buzzed past Theo’s shoulder, pulling his attention to a tiny, blue-haired fairy. They stopped to flutter over the counter and surveyed the offerings, just one of which could easily have fed them for a week.

“I’ve got your order ready,” Taenya said as her previous customer turned for the exit with her bag, and hurried into the back. Quickly the auburn-haired elf returned with the tiniest brown bag Theo had ever seen. “Here you go,” she said, handing the bag to the fairy. “One dozen cinnamon buns, just as you ordered.”

Theo wondered what kind of pastry magic it took for Taenya to fashion a dozen tiny buns and bake them properly. But by the fairy's high-pitched squeal of joy upon opening the bag, he surmised the elf had gotten it just right.

Not wanting to hurry Arleta, he readjusted the satchel on his shoulder and eyed Faylin, who'd already finished off his treats and curled up fast asleep in the glow of a sunbeam near the window. Theo walked toward the open door on the left side of the bakery, which led into the new expansion. A paper sign hanging on the wood declared that *Stay and Sip a While* would open for business in two days. Until they got everything running smoothly, he'd operate the place himself.

This was an additional reason for Theo's off-kilter emotions as of late. He really didn't know what he'd gotten himself into.

He wandered into the new space and gazed around. The idea had been to create a bar like *The Tricky Goat* in town for gathering, socializing and relaxing but sans alcohol. Not that Theo had anything against a drink or two since he enjoyed them himself, but sometimes something a little lighter was in order, particularly when paired with baked goods.

He and Arleta had ordered the best coffee from northern farms and an array of teas from the east, all of which were displayed in carefully labeled glass jars on shelves behind the bar. They also planned to shop the local market for in-season fruit to make fresh juice combinations.

A chalkboard sign on the counter described the coffee farm the beans and teas were sourced from and told a short version of the farmers' charming stories.

Theo had wanted the whole place to be warm and cozy, and it was. In one corner an overstuffed dark green couch was flanked by contrasting sunny yellow chairs. He took a moment to admire his dwarf friend Doli's handiwork on the colorful throw pillows. From the ceiling hung green and white *Hedera helix* plants in pots, and *Codiaeum Petra* and *Philodendron* sat on shelves. Above the bar hung a menu touting drink options like Peanut Butter Hot Chocolate, Cardamom Rose Tea, Spiced Apple Latte and Maple Cinnamon Cold Brew.

The place was nearly ready.

Although it should have comforted him, the fact tightened Theo's shoulders, and spiraling thoughts popped into his head. *Will the café do well? Will people like it? Is opening a new shop really a good idea when*

Arleta and I are expecting a baby? She already has enough responsibility on her plate.

“The place looks great, doesn’t it?” Arleta’s soft voice came from behind Theo as she slid her hand over his shoulder. “I love all the plants you picked out.”

He squashed down his fears and turned to smile at her. “It does.”

Theo had spent hours agonizing over the perfect foliage for the place.

Arleta chuckled, then pointed to the sofa. “Apparently Doli had both Sarson and Jez on pillow stuffing duty yesterday.”

Theo forgot about himself for a second as he envisioned the fennex and the huge gargoyle scowling as the tiny dwarf ordered them about. “Jez?”

“Oh, Taenya promised her a candlelit dinner, an extra helping of peas and an early bedtime.” Arleta chuckled, her hazel eyes crinkling in the corners. She drew her hand upward and touched the necklace Theo had given her, with its Little Mouse constellation pendant.

“That tracks. Probably the early bedtime put it over the top,” Theo said, gulping as her motion drew his eyes to interesting places he’d really like to have touched if they’d been in private and Arleta was amiable. Instead, he slipped the satchel off his shoulder and held it out. “Your lunch.”

Every day since the bakery had opened Theo walked there to give Arleta her lunch if it wasn’t a day off. Of course he could have sent it with her each morning. But there was no fun in missing an extra opportunity to see his Fated.

“Thanks.” She took the bag and peered inside. “Mmm.”

“Roast beef sandwich with *lots* of horseradish,” Theo said, not letting on that the spread had made his eyes water so much when he’d accidentally tasted it that Faylin asked him if he was okay.

Horseradish had been Arleta’s second most requested food item after the iweocots. She ate it on almost everything these days. He’d even spotted her spreading it on a juicy iweocot the week prior but made it a point not to judge.

Arleta looked up from the bag, her eyes twinkling. “You take care of me so well.” Then she raised up on her toes and kissed him, lingering over his cheek before she dropped down. “You’re going to take care of *all* of us so well.” She clutched the bag in one hand and ran the other over her belly.

Theo gulped. *Is that true? Will I be a good father?* He didn’t want Arleta to worry, so he quickly pushed the stinging thoughts aside. “See you

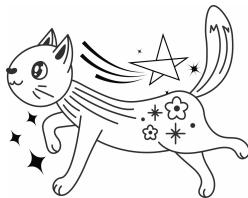
tonight,” he managed and forced a grin.

“You will.” Arleta spun on her heel, making her ivory and daisy patterned cotton skirt balloon a bit, and strolled to the bakery counter where Taenya juggled three customers. Faylin sauntered past her and stopped just inside the café to stretch luxuriously.

“What was I thinking, opening a new business?” Theo muttered and his eyes dropped to the lynx, who stared at him with slightly narrowed blue eyes.

Perhaps the spell shop *would* have something to manage the situation . . . at least until he got himself under control.

CHAPTER TWO



Feelings stuffed and with an iweocot bun in hand, Theo made his way down the main street with Faylin at his side once more. Preoccupied with the prospect of visiting the spell shop, the elf bit off close to half the pastry and didn't chew it enough times before he swallowed.

The sizeable chunk dragged against his throat before he gulped it down and coughed.

“You can’t go that way either,” Faylin droned, not even looking at Theo, apparently back to their ancient conversation before entering the bakery.

“Thanks for the concern,” Theo got out after recovering from the coughing fit.

Faylin’s dark-tipped ear flicked. “You managed. Though if this were a genuine emergency, I’d drag you to the healer. He can bring back the dead if it’s only been a few minutes and no major damage has been done to the body or brain.”

It was a fact Theo had not known, and he wondered why Faylin did.

“I feel so much better knowing you care enough to drag me halfway across Adenashire to make sure you don’t miss lunch.” Theo coughed one last time to clear his throat.

“Glad to calm your fears,” the lynx said with a hint of humor playing in his tone. “But it’s more than that.”

“Breakfast and dinner?” Theo’s tone flattened.

Faylin glanced at his friend briefly. “Among other things.”

By the time Theo had finished the last of his bun—eaten in much smaller, well-chewed bites—the two of them had arrived at *Spells and Sortilege*, straight down the main street from the bakery. The wood-framed building stood across from *Floral Fantasies*, the local florist shop owned by a nice human woman named Bonnie. She and Theo had talked about plants many times when he stopped in to browse her selection or pick up something pretty for Arleta. He’d purchased most of the café plants from the shop.

Part of him wanted to just stop for a little plant therapy instead of going to the spell shop. But he figured Faylin would have something to say about it, so he trudged on, at least willing to humor his friend. It wouldn’t hurt to look or ask Ibus Ironflame a few questions. The wizard owner had always seemed nice to Theo, plus he kept a small stock of good sparkling wine from his brother’s vineyard.

If nothing else Theo would pretend to be wine shopping and be on his merry way.

As the two entered the musty shop, Theo was relieved to see the shop was empty save for the aging gray-haired wizard stocking small potion bottles behind the counter. Adenashire was a marvelous place to live, but as with any other small town, gossip spread quickly.

Faylin veered to the right where several bundles of fragrant catnip hung drying and rubbed his face against them, making the crumbly leaves fall and litter the wood floor. A rumble of thunderous purrs came from his throat, and before Theo knew it the lynx had flipped over onto his back and batted at the drying plants with his large, furry front paw.

Theo began to suspect the lynx’s actual motives for coming to *Spells and Sortilege*.

The spell shop was fairly dark with only a hint of sun streaming through the windows and highlighting the dust floating in the air. Theo almost wondered if the proprietor had cast a permanent spell to maintain a moody atmosphere even at midmorning on a clear day. The shelves surrounding him were stocked with warding trinkets, enchanted teas and stacks of small, sealed scrolls. There was even a shelf in the back with a handwritten sign reading “Clearance.” Theo didn’t figure any half-priced items would solve his problems, though it certainly would have been nice.

“Morning,” Ibus called from behind the desk, a bottle of glittery purple potion in his hand. “Or is it afternoon yet?”

“Still morning,” Theo confirmed while keeping his composure and turning his attention to the wine bottle display.

“Anything I can help you with this . . .” Ibus paused for a second and glanced at the window before saying, “morning?”

Theo opened his mouth with the intention to just get it over with, then, chickening out, reached for the bottle labeled *Enchanted Vineyards*. He ran the tips of his fingers over the glass neck and said, “Just browsing.”

“Let me know if you need anything,” Ibus said and returned to stocking the shelves.

A cold nose and prickly whiskers pressed into Theo’s palm. “Wine solves no one’s problems,” Faylin whispered. The cat had appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

Theo rolled his eyes at the lynx, whose face was speckled with dried leaves. “But catnip does?”

“I have a question.” Faylin turned from Theo and addressed the wizard.

At the announcement Theo’s heart immediately sank into his feet and he turned toward his friend, already padding on white paws toward Ibus. The elf cleared his throat and stuffed his hands into his pockets.

“I’ll try to answer, good sir.” Ibus stopped what he was doing, leaned his elbows onto the counter and rested his chin in one hand, his attention fully on the lynx as if he were a potential paying customer.

“A *friend* of mine is experiencing . . .” Faylin paused for a blink. “Well, they are having a difficult time dealing with current events in their life.”

At least Faylin had attempted to hide that the *friend* was standing right there.

Theo gulped and turned back to the wine display. He plucked the nearest bottle, with an illustration of a faun holding a bunch of grapes just over his open mouth. “This one looks nice. What year is it?”

Faylin briefly flattened his ears in annoyance.

After squinting one eye at Faylin Ibus asked, “Could you be a tad more specific? I do have potions dealing with that sort of thing. In order to recommend the right one I need a few more details.”

“Well,” Faylin said as he sat on the worn wooden floor, his dark tail swishing languidly behind him, “I don’t want to invade his—ahem—their privacy, but I *am* concerned.”

Theo cringed.

“Oh, certainly,” Ibus said. “We are most discreet here at *Spells and Sortilege*, but a general idea of this friend’s difficulties would help me make a suggestion.” The wizard straightened, took a book from a low shelf and placed it on the counter. “The best way to determine the right potion would be for your friend to come in themselves and give me the information.”

“Yes,” Faylin said. “That makes sense.”

After that he and Ibus said nothing for what seemed like an age, and the silence bore down on Theo’s chest. Finally he sighed and walked over to join Faylin, the floor creaking beneath his steps.

“It’s me,” he admitted. “I’m the friend.”

Ibus’s gray eyes brightened. “Oh, well, that will make finding the correct formula much easier then.”

“You’re welcome,” Faylin whispered under his breath to Theo. Then he stood up and headed back to the catnip.

Theo briefly considered lecturing the lynx later about the importance of privacy but knew it would do no good. The cat would likely fall asleep in the middle of the rebuke.

“Why don’t you tell me what symptoms you’re experiencing?” the wizard said, flipping open the weathered tome.

Faylin’s loud catnip-enjoying purrs at the front of the store buzzed like locusts in Theo’s ears, but he took a deep breath, blew it out, and then spoke. “Life seems less manageable lately. I mean . . . I’m able to get through difficult moments by breathing or quieting my mind. But there’s a lot going on right now and I need to be . . . more clearheaded.”

“Hmm, yes,” Ibus said in a dreamy tone as he ran his finger down one page. “General anxiety? Such as buzzing in your chest or middle?” He kept his eyes on the book.

“Yes to both,” Theo admitted, once again stuffing his hands deep into his pant pockets. He wished he’d simply bought a bottle of wine. He could have been drinking it already instead of answering questions.

Ibus flipped the page, still scanning. “Hmm,” he intoned again. “Wood elf, right?”

“Yes. All my life.” Theo immediately regretted the feeble joke and shifted his weight uncomfortably.

The wizard finally shouted, “Ah ha!” and plunked his finger down with a thump. “This is the one.”

“Found it?” Theo asked.

The wizard pushed the book toward Theo and the tome slid to the edge of the counter till it was hanging halfway off.

The title, Theo now saw, was *A Wizard's Guide to Ailments of the Northern Lands*.

"I should have thought of this immediately." Ibus turned and surveyed the potions shelved behind the counter.

Theo's eyes moved to the precariously balanced book, then used his index finger to slowly push it back to safety. Behind him Faylin growled and whined. The elf rolled his eyes and resigned himself to buying the catnip his friend was crushing into his fur.

Reaching up to the top shelf, the wizard pulled down a dark blue vial of liquid, then turned while dusting it off. He chuckled. "This one's been up there a while because I don't get a lot of elves in here, but I think it's the right one for you." Ibus held the vial out to Theo.

The wizard's comment made sense. It wasn't unheard of since both Theo and Taenya had ended up in Adenashire, but most elves tended to remain in elf regions like Langheim.

Theo took the bottle gingerly and blurted, "How much do I owe you?"

"Before that, I should tell you what it is," Ibus said.

Theo set the potion down on the counter. "Oh, of course."

"In the end the potion's effect will be general stress reduction," Ibus explained.

"Sounds like what I need," Theo said, trying to ignore the huffing sounds Faylin was making. He imagined the cat suddenly charging through the shop without warning, tail high, doing a few loops, taking out the clearance section, then immediately falling asleep.

Faylin really liked catnip.

Seeming oblivious to the lynx, Ibus tipped his head back and forth as if it was helping him form his next words. "Elf physiology has some important differences from other intelligent beings, so the potion doesn't work *directly*."

"And that means?" Theo was intrigued, but Ibus's evasiveness concerned him.

The wizard poked the bottle, and the blue liquid swirled with iridescence before it settled again. "The symptom management the potion provides is personalized. What soothes your nerves might do the complete opposite to

another elf. If you take it, within twenty-four hours the concoction will take full effect, providing you with some type of relief.”

Wrinkling his brow, Theo asked, “So by this time tomorrow I should be better? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Unfortunately I can’t guarantee that,” Ibus said. He quickly added, “But you should be on the road to healing by then.”

Theo lowered his chin and stared at the wizard, hoping he might have something more to add. “And?”

“And nothing.” The wizard shrugged and brushed his fingertips across the book’s pages. “As the book says, the personalized effect is unpredictable since no two elves are alike.” He held his finger up. “But I’ll tell you what. I’ll give you the potion on the house since it’s a sort of experiment for both of us. Report back to me on the outcome and that will be plenty of payment.”

Theo stared down at the vial. An experiment? That was not what he’d come into the spell shop for. If he was going to take some sort of magical concoction, he wanted a sure thing. He wanted to be at his best for Arleta . . . and himself, for that matter.

“You don’t have anything else?” Theo asked, scanning the plethora of potions on the shelves.

Ibus shook his head. “Not unless you want to wait a few months. I could place some orders for alternatives.” He slid the vial closer to Theo.

A few months was unacceptable. Theo needed to solve this problem as soon as possible. What harm could possibly come from a healing potion, after all? “Fine. I’ll give it a go.”

“Wonderful,” Ibus said and reached for a neat stack of paper bags to his right. “I’ll wrap it up for you.”

Theo waved at the wizard. “No need. I’ll take it right now.”

“Oh.” The wizard’s eyebrows raised. “Well, I’m not stopping you.”

“Don’t want to lose my nerve.” Theo chuckled, grabbed the bottle and thumbed the cork top onto the counter where it bounced twice before settling. He downed the contents. It tasted much better than he expected, like a thick, sweet apple syrup.

Satisfied, he plunked the empty vial down on the counter, then turned back to Faylin, whose entire brown and white body was speckled with catnip leaves. He lay on his back, white belly up and eyes closed.

“I guess I’ll take a catnip bundle too,” Theo said, determined to stay positive about what he’d just done.

In twenty-four hours all would be well again. He was sure of it.

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CHAPTER THREE



It was nearly time for Arleta to come home from the bakery, and Theo was no better as he sat slumped in one of their worn living room chairs. If anything he felt worse. Not from the potion he'd taken but from the waiting for it to work.

Of course Faylin was no help. The lynx lay in the corner sleeping off his catnip escapade on a fluffy red velvet bed complete with matching silk piping along the seams. Doli had insisted he needed it and had spent an entire week sewing the pillow. Faylin would tell anyone who listened that the dwarf understood the kind of luxury all felines were entitled to.

Thankfully once they'd arrived home from the spell shop, Theo still had enough of his mind about him to prepare dinner and water his indoor plants. The bubbling beef stew with vegetables would be served with the leftover sourdough bread Arleta would undoubtedly bring home from the bakery.

The stew's savory aroma had made the cottage smell delicious, but he'd gotten nothing else done. Laundry lay piled next to their bed, the floors needed sweeping. He'd even forgotten to clean out Nimbus's stall and knew when he did it the next morning, the horse would give him a piece of his mind.

Instead he sat in the armchair with magic sparkling from his hand. A potted pothos on the side table was wrapping its vines through his fingers.

If Arleta asked, he'd say the day had got away from him. Theo didn't want to worry her about his current emotional state or the fact that he'd drunk a strange potion, which not even the wizard who'd made it understood how it worked.

He could have just bought the wine.

Bang, bang. The forceful sound came from the door. Theo flinched and the pothos drew back to the pot.

The knocker was likely Verdreth or Ervash, the orcs who lived next door and Arleta's surrogate dads, wanting to collect the bag of leftover pastries and bread she brought home for them each day.

Theo ran his hands through his hair to straighten it out as much as possible without looking in a mirror.

The sound came again, and Faylin let out a snore but didn't wake. "You take that," the lynx murmured, thrusting a paw at an unseen attacker.

"You in there, elf?" came Ervash's deep voice from outside.

"I'm coming," Theo called, peeling himself from the comfort of the chair and standing. He hurried to the door and flung it open. "Arleta's not home yet."

The hulking green orc whose dark hair was just starting to gray stood on the stoop. As usual he was bare-chested, showing off his rippling chest and arm muscles complete with a large black tattoo snaking up his right arm. Nothing new about the sight . . . except one thing. One very different thing.

Ervash cradled a sleeping black and white kitten draped over the aforementioned tattooed arm. The animal looked minuscule against the gigantic orc, but at a closer look it was likely approaching eight weeks, just the time it might be weaned from its mother.

"Is this yours?" Ervash presented the kitten, keeping his voice down as if not to wake the baby despite his banging on the door only moments before.

Theo blinked twice at the scene, wondering if he was seeing things correctly. Then he peered outside beyond Ervash to check if Arleta or any other friends were playing a joke on him. No one else was there.

"No," Theo said. "Why would it be mine?"

Ervash clicked his tongue and frowned, making the tusks at the corners of his mouth lower slightly. "Because you like cats."

"And that. And that!" Faylin's voice had grown louder behind Theo.

"Um, yes," Theo conceded, glancing over his shoulder at the dreaming lynx. "It's not to say *every* cat in the realm belongs to me." He gazed down

at the sleeping kitten. “They are cute, though.”

The orc held the kitten, whose eyes cracked open, out closer to Theo. “How about you ask her who she belongs to since the tyke keeps coming inside our house and meowing like she wants us to feed her.”

Most small cats around Adenashire served as barn cats and found most of their own meals. Theo wasn’t aware of anyone but him who actually had a cat living in his house, though Faylin didn’t really count as a regular house cat.

“She probably *is* hungry,” Theo said, not knowing whether Ervash had actually confirmed the kitten’s gender or was only guessing.

Ervash scowled. “Ask her.”

“Fine.” The kitten blinked its gray-gold eyes sleepily and Theo asked aloud, “Where’d you come from?”

Instead of the mental reply Theo usually heard when he spoke to animals, only a blank space existed.

Ervash leaned in for the answer. “Well?”

Theo shrugged. “She might be too young to talk to me.”

“You should take her then.” The orc grasped the kitten in his meaty hand and pushed her toward Theo. “She’s hungry.”

The kitten mewed as if in agreement.

Theo raised his hands to ward off the creature, unwilling to take her from his surrogate father-in-law no matter how imposing he might be. Though the fact that he held a tiny kitten like a delicate piece of china took the edge off his intimidating orcish appearance. “You found her, you feed her. I have too much going on with the café about to open.”

“What would I feed her?” Ervash’s normal baritone voice suddenly veered toward the tenor range, and alarm sparked in his eyes as he brought the kitten back to his chest. She began purring, probably loving the warmth since orcs ran hot.

“What are you having for dinner?” Theo asked, slightly exasperated that Ervash seemed unable to figure out what to feed a kitten.

“Chicken,” Ervash answered quickly. “I made three.”

“Okay,” Theo said, suddenly picturing Verdreth and Ervash scrambling for the drumsticks at the dinner table. “That would work. Make sure to mix in some of the giblets. Cats need those.”

Ervash knit his brows in concern. “But those are my favorite parts.”

“You’ll have to share today,” Theo said, looking at the small kitten, whose eyes were growing sleepy again. “I doubt she eats much, and we can figure everything out tomorrow. For now offer her a meal, give her a bed.” He paused for a second. “And a place to relieve herself.”

Ervash’s brows knit again, so Theo quickly explained that a small box with a little sandy soil in the bottom would do the trick.

“Then she’ll take care of the rest?” Ervash held the kitten a few inches from his face and examined her. Despite the tusks protruding from each side of his mouth, the kitten looked completely unalarmed.

“Cats are smart animals,” Theo assured him. “She’ll know what to do.”

The kitten mewed again and Ervash snuggled her close to his chest. “You sure you can’t take her?” Despite the question, the way he was cradling the tiny beast made Theo think he might not have meant it.

“Prepare to die!” Faylin shouted, then let out a thunderous snort.

Theo gestured with his head back inside the cottage. “I’ve already got Faylin to deal with.”

“Right, right.” The orc shifted to turn. “A small box with some sandy soil?”

“Yes,” Theo confirmed. “Dig some up from around the lavender plants in the garden out back. Then show it to her once and she’ll catch the drift. Don’t forget the chicken with giblets.”

The orc nodded and trudged back toward his cottage, all the way babbling and cooing to the kitten like one would to their own child.

Theo shook his head and wondered as he closed the door whether the kitten might be staying for more than just the night.

“What was that about?” Faylin asked, suddenly awake and lounging in his bed as if he were a king.

“Ervash and Verdreth have a cat now,” Theo said as he went to the kitchen to stir the stew and get bowls and spoons out. The proclamation sounded strange. It wasn’t as if the orcs disliked animals, but it had never occurred to him that they might enjoy one living with them.

Faylin’s ears pricked up. “You don’t say.”

“You don’t say what?” Arleta came through the front door with a large paper bag in the crook of her arm. The messy bun that had been squarely on top of her head when Theo saw her at the bakery that morning was now loosened and off-kilter. Several frizzy tendrils hung randomly around her

face. The whole look was proof of how hard she'd worked that day, and Theo thought it made her even more appealing.

"Your dads have a cat now," Faylin blurted out before Theo could reply. "You just missed Ervash."

"A cat?" Arleta's eyes widened with surprise as she reached into the bag and pulled out a sturdy, round sourdough loaf complete with a floral pattern scored into the top and set it on the breadboard beside the small slab of soft, creamy butter Theo had placed there earlier.

"A kitten, specifically." Theo stirred the beef stew while ribbons of steam rose from the pot. "Of course, I'm not actually sure if they're keeping it. She's their guest for the night."

"Their guest?" Arleta asked. "I'm headed over to drop this off to them." She hoisted the bakery bag. "That will give me an excuse to see for myself."

Still stirring, Theo said, "Dinner's ready, so don't be long."

Arleta leaned a bit to the left to peek at the meal. "Looks good . . . smells good too. I'd also like some pickles on the side, please." She kissed Theo on the cheek.

"Pickles?" Theo questioned, still sensing the warmth of her lips. "That's a new one."

"Popped up today in the middle of eating the sandwich you made me." She shrugged. "I have no control over this issue. The baby is in charge."

Theo chuckled. "Good thing I made a batch of them a few days ago." He reached into the cold box and drew out a jar of pickled cucumbers floating in a yellowish liquid, then held it out toward Arleta. "We have an overabundance of cucumbers in the garden."

Her hazel eyes widened at the sight and she set her bag down on the counter. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Because I wasn't aware that you loved them so much? The thought hadn't made it to his lips when, to Theo's surprise, Arleta snatched the jar from his hands, twisted the lid and plucked a pickle from the vinegar brine. She shoved the jar back at Theo, who was a bit startled by her enthusiasm.

"But no more iweocots. Can't stand the sight of them now." Arleta bit off the end of the pickle then scooped the bag up again, her eyes sparkling with delight. "A little pre-dinner snack . . . but keep those out. I'm not done with them. Shan't be a minute."

With that she spun on her heel, pickle in hand, and left to deliver the pastries to her dads.

“Glad to please,” Theo called, but he was pretty sure Arleta hadn’t heard him.

“Since when does Arleta use the word ‘shan’t’?” Faylin padded up to his bowl in the kitchen and sat next to it.

Theo eyed the jar in his hands. “Since she became such a big fan of pickles, I guess.” The elf set it down on the counter and returned to his stew. Into each bowl he scooped a large portion of tender meat, potatoes, carrots and parsnips flavored with thyme and rosemary. All the produce was picked from the sizeable back garden they shared with Ervash and Verdreth.

Arleta had been a good caretaker of the garden for years, ever since her parents passed away, and since Theo moved in it had flourished even more. He loved being out there. Soil and plants held memories of times long past, both the good and the bad, and Theo enjoyed listening to their stories and wisdom. In exchange for his care the garden was more than willing to share its bounty with him. Although he hadn’t been spending as much time out there as he liked of late.

Clank, clank. The annoying sound broke Theo from his thoughts, and he twisted to see Faylin pawing his empty metal bowl.

“Ahem.” The lynx cleared his throat.

“When do I ever not feed you?” Theo asked, turning back to finish filling the bowls with stew.

“Last week you were late at least twice,” Faylin growled and pawed his bowl again. *Clank.*

“Late doesn’t mean I forgot,” Theo insisted. “I’ve been a little distracted. Once that potion kicks in, everything should be better.”

He hoped.

“And did you thank me for that?” Faylin asked.

Theo let out a long sigh and rolled his eyes at his friend before bending to retrieve the bowl from the floor. “You know you’re annoying, right?”

The lynx merely tipped his chin toward the steaming pot and licked his lips.

Theo filled the bowl, set it on the ground and gave the lynx a pat on the head.

“You love me,” Faylin said as he lowered his face to the dish.

“I do,” Theo said, returning to dinner preparations. He was pretty sure he heard Faylin, deep in the process of devouring his meal, return the sentiment.

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CHAPTER FOUR



Theo woke shivering and clutching the meager edge of their woolen blanket with most of his body completely exposed. He glanced over his shoulder, expecting to see it wrapped around Arleta but instead found Faylin sprawled asleep on his back, belly to the realm, mouth open, tongue lolling out, and clearly enjoying most of the cozy blanket.

He had been kind enough, however, to let Arleta share with him, and *she* was still mostly covered.

For a blink Theo thought to wake her since it was well past sunrise, and she should have already left. But then he remembered it was her day off from the bakery.

Wanting more sleep, the elf gave the blanket a swift tug of desperation, but it didn't budge from underneath Faylin. He didn't want to wake his Fated. She deserved the sleep after a hard week's work.

The striped lynx let out a snort, then muttered something Theo couldn't understand. Probably best he didn't.

Yielding to his fate, he sat up and swung his legs off the bed. Their room was simple but well-kept, just the way he liked it. A small painting of Arleta as a child with her parents sat propped on the dresser beside the exit, and Theo often thought he should have mementos of his family next to them. Even so he could never bring himself to have a likeness made of his brother Kellam, who'd died young. Also it wasn't as if he wanted to be reminded of

his parents. He'd always tried to avoid thoughts of his absent father, and since the Baking Battle he'd corresponded with his mother as little as possible. The less she knew about his current life, the better. He did still write to a second cousin he got along with, Wyn Brylar, largely to keep up with what was happening back in Langheim.

Most of her news was pretty mundane. Of course, he had asked his cousin to leave out any drama.

After a moment, Theo stood and rubbed his tired eyes. He'd hoped the potion would help him get a better night's sleep. Instead he'd tossed and turned, waking several times from dreams about being poked in the back with a stick. Looking back at Faylin, who'd already rolled onto Theo's feather pillow, he thought the dreams might have been inspired by reality.

It hadn't been twenty-four hours yet, so he kept up hope. Perchance the potion still needed time to work. And he was pretty sure the brew wouldn't do anything about Faylin's blanket thievery.

Quietly he pulled the curtains closed, shutting out the morning rays so Arleta could sleep longer.

"Finally," Faylin mumbled and smacked his lips together, eyes still closed.

Theo chuckled softly as he walked from the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

After pulling on his boots and a light jacket, then tucking a little something in his pocket from the kitchen, he ventured outside. Each step woke up his body a little bit more. The fresh morning air and the earthy scents of herbs and soil filled his nostrils as he ambled past the garden and out to Nimbus's stable.

The large gray and white speckled steed stood grazing outside the barn and brought his head up, ears pricked as Theo opened the gate and entered the paddock. It was unusual for the horse to be out of the barn for breakfast so early, but perhaps he'd been waiting for the elf.

Morning, the horse's words came into Theo's head.

"Morning," Theo responded aloud. He reached into his pocket and grasped the orb inside without drawing it out.

Running a little late, eh? The horse stamped one hoof on the ground and eyed Theo's pocket.

Theo produced a shiny red apple and held it out. Nimbus immediately opened his mouth and took the fruit.

“Only a day,” Theo said. “I could give you my excuse, but it doesn’t matter. I’m sorry.”

Nimbus finished chewing the apple. *Apology accepted. Now I’d like you to help me with something, other than the rest of my breakfast and cleaning the barn, of course.*

Theo’s pointed ears perked up since Nimbus rarely asked for much. He was gentle and mostly satisfied with his horse life. “What do you need?” Theo asked as he donned a pair of work gloves and retrieved a large bundle of hay, breaking it apart on the grass for Nimbus to eat.

After lowering his head and grabbing a mouthful, the horse spoke into Theo’s mind. *Last night a few guests moved in.* He tipped his chin toward the barn. *I needed a little peace this morning and came out here.*

Theo scrunched his forehead in confusion while a breeze fluttered his hair off his forehead. “What do you mean, guests?”

If a horse could shrug, it seemed Nimbus would have done it. *See for yourself.*

Wondering why the horse was being so cryptic, Theo patted him on the neck and trudged over to the barn. “Okay, old friend.” The sounds of Nimbus’s steps followed behind him. Theo walked through the open barn door, and inside waited a family of cats—well, two cats and three kittens.

The cat closest to him, a large ginger male, turned his head and blinked large green eyes at Theo. The other adult was a smaller calico and the likely mother of the ginger, brown, and black and white tabby kittens romping atop the grain storage. The kittens didn’t even seem to notice Theo and Nimbus. If they did, they didn’t seem to care.

“Oh,” Theo said to the two adults, surprised. “Where did you come from?”

They sat looking blankly at the elf, and no voices from *any* of the cats came into his mind. Just like the kitten the orcs had found the night before. She must have been from the same litter. At least that mystery had been solved.

They didn’t tell me anything either. Nimbus stopped beside Theo. *Of course, not all cats understand horse.*

Theo couldn’t understand why *he* couldn’t talk with them. He hadn’t been unable to at least marginally communicate with any animal since he was young and learning to control his magic. The stress must really have been

getting to him. He bent down and held out his hand to demonstrate that he meant no harm.

The calico glanced at the ginger, then ambled toward Theo. She stopped and sniffed his hand, then rubbed her cheek on it. She settled down in a loaf shape and gave him a slow blink. Theo took that as confirmation that the family was friendly, and he stroked her spine. Her back end immediately raised and she turned to rub his hand again. Seconds later the kittens were playing around his feet, mewing as if to say they wanted something to eat.

“These cats are *not* wild,” Theo said to Nimbus. He was thinking about Faylin’s likely inability to make it on his own after all the years Theo had looked after him. “They’re going to need someone to care for them.”

Tamed cats *always* needed someone to look after them since they were not prepared for the wide world.

Looks like you and Arleta have some new barn cats then. Nimbus bobbed his speckled head up and down as if having a good laugh. *I wouldn’t mind the company, even without a rousing conversation.*

Theo spent the next hour or so giving Nimbus’s stall a good cleaning, then filled his water and grain. The cats followed him everywhere, inspecting the work, mewing and chasing shadows cast on the barn walls by the morning light.

“Okay,” Theo announced to the cat family, wiping sweat from his temples. “You all stay here, and I’ll go get you something to eat.” He also planned to tell the orcs he’d found the black and white kitten’s family in case they wanted to reunite her with them.

He would also need to tell Arleta and Faylin they had new guests.

Still hot from all the shoveling, Theo grabbed his cast-off jacket and made his way back to the cottage.

After removing his dirty boots and leaving them on the porch, Theo found Arleta sitting at the table, fully dressed for the day and enjoying a toasted and buttered slice of the sourdough loaf she’d brought home the night before. The nearly empty jar of pickles sat open next to her. Faylin napped in his velvet bed.

“You’re up,” Theo announced as he hung his jacket by the door.

“I’ve been up since right after you left,” Arleta said. “His highness over there took all the blankets.” She tipped her head in the lynx’s direction and rolled her eyes.

Faylin didn’t stir.

“Sounds familiar.” Theo went to the sink bowl in the kitchen, where he poured water from the pitcher over his hands and grabbed the bar of soap from its dish. On a shelf overhead was a line of herbology books that once belonged to Arleta’s father. As he lathered, Theo said, “So, I was out in the barn and I found something I need to tell you about. Well, not exactly *something* . . . *someone* . . . or—”

“*Someones?*” Arleta asked, sounding as if her mouth was full of toast.

“Um, yes.” Theo used the pitcher again to wash off the suds. “How did you know?”

“Because I’ve got a family of cats staring at me through the window,” Arleta said.

With a few bubbles of soap still on his hands, Theo spun around on his socked heel. Sure enough, all five cats were perched in the window box and staring in with their big, pleading eyes. The ginger tom raised his paw and lightly tapped on the glass as if to say *let me in*.

“I told them to stay back at the barn,” he said.

“Well, they didn’t.” Arleta chuckled. “I’m assuming they belong to my dads’ new kitten?”

Theo grabbed a cotton dishtowel slung over a cabinet door and quickly rubbed his hands dry. “Are they planning to keep her?”

Arleta shrugged and finished the last bite of her toast. “Verdreth was over here this morning with her on his shoulder and had already named her Checkers . . . so you tell me.” She picked up the pickle jar and drank some of the juice.

“What?” Theo asked, confused at both the cats’ presence and Arleta’s beverage of choice.

“I think someone is outside,” Faylin said, finally awake and sniffing the air with one eye cracked open.

“Do you think they’d be willing to take in the whole family?” Theo asked Arleta.

She stood and walked to the door, opened it and peered out. One by one the cats jumped down from the planter box and paraded in through the open door.

“Not sure, but I’m headed off to the bakery, so you might want to go ask them,” Arleta said as she watched the cat procession, pickle jar still in hand.

Theo scratched his head as a pit formed in his stomach, thinking about housing five cats. When was that potion going to kick in? “It’s your day

off.”

He would need a few more litter boxes. They did have two bedrooms, but the second was used for Arleta’s baking pantry, although she’d cleared much of her stock out and moved it to the bakery after it had opened. When the baby came, that room would be theirs. But perhaps he could set it up for the cats temporarily.

“I know,” Arleta said. “But I have a few recipes I can’t get out of my mind and want to practice. It’s easier to spread out all my ingredients there, and I was dreaming about lime all night.”

At least that explained her craving for tart foods.

Arleta finished off the last of the pickles and juice, then gazed down at the cats sitting between her and Theo. “Plus, this place is getting a tad crowded. Not great for baking.”

A nervous laugh left Theo’s mouth. “Let me see what I can do about that.” He wasn’t sure if he should bring up his idea of housing the cats in the pantry/future nursery yet.

“Love you.” Arleta raised her hand and gave Theo and the cats a little wave before stepping through the door. “You can handle this!” came her muffled voice through the closed door.

She hadn’t even kissed him goodbye. Although Theo was pretty sure he smelled like a horse, so the oversight was understandable. He really needed to bathe and put on fresh clothes.

Faylin rose, stretched his back into a perfect arch, then padded past Theo to his food bowl. *Clank*. He pawed at it again.

“Didn’t Arleta feed you?” Theo asked while the cats looked on.

The forest lynx flicked his right tufted ear. “It’s time for second breakfast.”

Faylin pawed his bowl again and the cats began a hungry chorus of meows, while the littlest ginger circled Theo’s leg, making air biscuits on the floor.

CHAPTER FIVE



With everyone fed except himself, Theo flopped down on the living room chair and glanced at the small ticking clock on the mantel. 11 a.m.

Right around the time he'd drunk the potion the day before. It had been nearly twenty-four hours since he'd taken the brew from Ibus.

It should have been doing *something*.

Instead it was as if the weight on his chest had doubled, and now his limbs were like stones. Not only did he have five new cats to take care of, but looking around the room, there were too many things to be done. Sweeping, dusting . . . feeding time for the cats again. Faylin would surely invent third breakfast at any moment.

On top of everything else, the garden needed tending—weeds picked, produce harvested.

It was all too much. At least he'd made it out to Nimbus that morning before everything fell apart.

After Faylin finished his second breakfast, he went out back to sun himself. The two cat parents lay on the other living room chair intertwined like pretzels while their kittens slept soundly around them.

At the sight, Theo was reminded that he and Arleta would be parents before they knew it. The realization dropped another load of bricks on his chest, making it nearly impossible to breathe.

Despite wanting to find his Fated so desperately, Theo had never really seen himself as a parent. Not after experiencing the failure of his own father. Sometimes when he was young, he'd daydreamed that his father would come back and apologize for leaving him and his mother. They might have been happy again. Never whole since his brother wouldn't have been there. But happier.

That dream never came true. Instead Theo focused on his plant magic and relied on his animal friends. Animals were loyal . . . much more than people sometimes.

His chest compressed. He really needed to tell Arleta what he'd been experiencing. But she'd been so happy, and he didn't want to ruin her experience of preparing for motherhood. He didn't want to let her down.

Eyes closed, Theo took in a big breath and held it for a moment before blowing it out again. He didn't feel better.

Before he took another breath, a weight landed on his lap. Theo opened his eyes to see the tabby kitten standing and kneading his belly.

“Well, hello,” Theo said. On instinct he lifted his hand and stroked the baby’s furry head.

She mewed lightly, curled up in a ball, and drifted off to sleep.

With a cat asleep on his lap, Theo apparently wouldn't be going anywhere or having breakfast anytime soon. He gave in and quickly dropped off to sleep.

Sometime later his eyes snapped open to banging on the door, and the kitten scurried away. The other cats had sat up on their chair, looking toward the sound.

Bang, bang. It sounded again.

“You there, Theo?” This time it was Verdreth’s voice, sounding urgent.

Theo surmised it was about Checkers. Perhaps they'd decided having a kitten wasn't for them. Or she needed lunch.

Bang, bang.

“Hang on, Verdreth,” Theo called and pushed up from the chair, sleep still heavy in his eyes. On the way to the door the elf watched his step to ensure no kittens or cats were underfoot, since dashing around the house was a core cat activity. Finally Theo swung open the door to his orc father-in-law, dressed in a smart pair of tweed pants, a pressed white shirt and a blue velvet vest over the top. His spectacles perched on the end of his green nose

while he held Checkers snuggled up to his neck. The orc was so big that Theo could barely see around him out into the front garden.

“What can I do for you?” Theo asked, glancing back at the cats to make sure none of them were planning to bolt outside. “Is something wrong with the kitten?”

“No, no. She’s fine. Great, in fact,” Verdreth insisted, nestling Checkers closer as if Theo might take her from him. “But something is going on.” He peered into the house. “Are there more cats in there?”

Theo nodded reluctantly. “They showed up this morning in the barn and followed me home. I think they might be Checkers’s family.”

“Oh?” Verdreth raised his brow in surprise.

“That said,” Theo hurried to say, “the kittens seem old enough to go off on their own if they want.” The calico mother walked up beside him and sat peering out the open door, looking completely unbothered.

She gazed up and trilled at Checkers. The black and white kitten mewed back before settling further onto Verdreth’s chest.

Faylin’s voice came from somewhere off the porch. “Theo? What’s going on?”

Suddenly annoyed, Theo blurted to Verdreth, “Both of you have said that. Can someone tell me what the problem is?”

Verdreth stepped aside, revealing not only Faylin approaching through the yard but multiple other full-grown cats—a midnight black one, a brown and tan colorpoint, a tortoiseshell with a scowl, a gray one with emerald green eyes, and several others.

“Why are there more cats in my yard?” Theo’s hands grew instantly sweaty and he shoved them in his pockets.

“I thought maybe you’d tell me,” Verdreth said as Ervash trudged around the corner.

The other shirtless orc stopped a few paces from the door and gazed around at the clowder. “Where’d all the cats come from?” he asked as if he’d simply come over to borrow a cup of sugar.

Theo stood there gazing out at the animals in his yard while the calico circled his legs. He had the same question.

“This is a lot of cats,” Faylin said as he joined the elf. “It’s like they’re waiting for something.”

Theo realized that Faylin was right. The cats had all stopped near the porch and sat quietly watching him. He studied each of them but received

nothing in his mind. They were all like Checkers and the cats inside the cottage. He couldn't communicate with them . . . or else they were choosing not to speak.

"Whatever it is," Verdreth said, cuddling Checkers, "we need to figure something out because I'm not sure we have enough room for that many litter boxes."

Theo raked his fingers through his hair, hoping the appearance of all these cats was simply some kind of coincidence. The twirling in his stomach told him it wasn't.

"Think the potion was bad?" Faylin asked and lifted his paw to lick it with his pink tongue.

Ervash shifted his weight. "What potion?"

Theo pinched at the bridge of his nose. "It's nothing," he insisted, fully aware that his proclamation made it sound like *something*. To be honest, though, he'd been wondering the same thing. What if Ibus had retrieved the wrong vial? Was there such a thing as a cat-attracting potion?

The shirtless orc reached out to the nearest cat, the scowly tortoiseshell. "Pstpstpst."

Despite her grumpy expression, the black and orange cat, looking as if she'd been daubed haphazardly with a paintbrush, stood immediately and walked to him, her tail high. The orc bent to run his hand over the length of her furry back.

"Look, Verdreth," he said, smiling. "This one's nice too."

Verdreth didn't respond to his partner but instead looked at Theo and inquired, "What potion?"

Theo really didn't want to go into the whole thing. "I just was a little under the weather yesterday. So I stopped in the spell shop."

"You should have gone to the healer if you didn't feel well," Ervash scolded, now holding the splotchy cat in his arms and scratching her chin.

Afraid Faylin might chime in at any moment, Theo gave him a quick side-eye. "I know. Next time I'll do that. Though I'm honestly not sure how these cats have anything to do with it." The elf's mind was whirling in a state of panic. What if the potion *had* brought all the cats? What if Ibus had made a mistake with the mixture? He had said that elf physiology was different. He should never have listened to Faylin.

Verdreth gave him a squinty look of concern, but Checkers squirmed in his hands, distracting the orc. "Are you hungry, my girl?" He set the kitten

down on the ground, where she immediately greeted what was likely her family who'd all gathered at the door. The calico licked her on the head before Checkers turned and trotted back to Verdreth.

"I'd love to help you figure this out," Verdreth said while pushing his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. "However, I'm very late in opening *It's About Tome*, and this lady wants a snacky."

"I'm late to a painting commission meeting," Ervash said. "But after that I'm glad to help." He still held the tortie, who looked quite content to stay in his arms.

"Me too . . . after I close the bookshop." Verdreth turned and walked toward his partner. "Are you keeping that one too?"

"Patches really likes me," Ervash insisted. "And she needs a home."

He was definitely keeping her.

"Patches, huh?" Verdreth asked as they walked side by side, leaving Theo, Faylin . . . and all the cats.

At least two of them were taken care of, but what was Theo going to do with the rest?

He trained his eyes on Faylin, who had now moved on to grooming his back. "Why'd you bring up the potion?"

"Friends often help solve problems," Faylin said, not even looking at Theo.

Balling his fists together, the elf blew out a long, deliberate breath and scanned around at the still-waiting cats. Once again Faylin was right. "Well, you need to be a friend, then, and head back to *Spells and Sortilege* with me."

The lynx lifted his head from his cleaning. "I don't have anything else to do."



Theo had told the cats to stay back at the cottage. Of course, being cats, none of them listened except for their five original guests.

The entire way there, the cats followed behind him like a feline parade. Theo didn't want to think about it, but he suspected that a few more had joined the procession out of nowhere. The line had grown.

The people of Adenashire were noticing the cats. Theo and Faylin ignored the looks and whispers and pretended they had no idea what the problem was. But Theo was aware of every curious eye on him.

“What is going on, Ibus?” Theo couldn't hold back the question as he burst into the dusty spell shop, even though the wizard was helping Mr. Figlet, a rotund quokkan, at the checkout.

“Here you are, sir,” Ibus said. “Take one spoonful in the morning and one at night for a week.”

Faylin was already helping himself to the newest catnip bundle on the wall.

The quokkan nodded and turned to Theo. He said nothing but raised a brow with interest, then made his way to the exit, bag in hand. Once the door swung open, he exclaimed, “What in the realm?” Before Theo could hear anything else Mr. Figlet might have to say about the gathering of cats, the door slammed behind him.

“Now what can I do for you, Mr. Brylar?” Ibus asked, still standing behind the desk. “How are you today? Better?”

“I think you gave me the wrong potion,” Theo blurted.

The wizard's lips pursed, and he reached under the counter to pull out the same book he'd consulted the day before. “Whatever do you mean? Try to be more specific.”

Thump. The sound came from a side window.

Theo glanced over at a cat he didn't recognize. The feline sat gracefully perched on the outside ledge and staring in through the glass. “*That's* what I mean.” He pointed to the curious gray and white cat with the colors split directly down the center of his face.

Ibus looked, then flipped to the page concerning the potion and stared at it. “A cat?” He sounded confused but didn't glance up again.

“Last night a kitten showed up next door,” Theo explained. “I didn't think much of it, and Ervash and Verdreth took her in.”

“They *are* a friendly couple,” Ibus interjected.

“Yes,” Theo agreed and pressed on, not wanting to let Ibus get him off track. “Then this morning I was out at my barn, where there were five more —”

“Barn cats aren’t that uncommon around these parts,” Ibus interjected as he turned to scan his potion collection.

Frustration prickled at Theo’s chest, and just then another cat jumped onto the ledge next to the first one. “Of course not. But I can’t communicate with these cats.”

“You normally exhibit magic that allows you to do so?” The wizard bent down and plucked a mostly empty bottle from the bottom shelf. He popped open the top and smelled it.

“Yes,” Theo said.

“That *is* odd,” Ibus said and held out the bottle to Theo. “But it doesn’t mean the potion was incorrect. This is most definitely the right one.”

Giving Ibus a blank stare and partially wishing Faylin wasn’t eating another bundle of catnip, Theo said, “But I don’t feel any better, and now I have at least twenty cats following me around.”

“Hmm.” Ibus glanced at the window. “I guess that would explain those two visitors.”

Tension moved up Theo’s spine due to Ibus’s annoyingly calm demeanor. “They weren’t even with me when I left the house.”

Ibus held the bottle in the air and examined it. “Most unusual.”

“Unusual?” Theo’s voice rose almost an octave. “Just give me something to get rid of this problem. We have way too much going on for me to be taking care of this many cats.”

“Oh, that won’t be possible.” Ibus shook his head.

“Why not?”

The wizard placed the bottle down next to the book. “There’s nothing to counteract this potion. But it *is* the right one,” he insisted. “You’re going to need to trust the process.”

Blinking twice, Theo slowly placed his hands on the counter. “Trust . . . the process?”

Ibus shrugged. “As I said yesterday, the potion’s effect is individual to the recipient. All I can figure is the result is linked to your magic since you exhibit nature abilities. Let it take its course, and if it doesn’t work as you’d like, it should eventually wear off.”

“Should?” Theo asked.

Ibus wrinkled his forehead. “It should.”

“What am I going to do with all these cats in the meantime?”

The question seemed to suck all the air out of the shop for a moment. The only sound was Faylin huffing again from the catnip’s effect.

Finally the wizard spoke. “I think you figuring that out is part of the process too.” Ibus reached over the counter and patted Theo on the shoulder. “This will be okay.”

Theo believed no such thing.

CHAPTER SIX



I bus Ironflame was full of it.

Of that Theo was certain as he made his way out of *Spells and Sortilege*, his money pouch lighter after paying for the two catnip bundles Faylin had eaten and rolled in.

There was no possible explanation—the wizard had to be pulling one over on him to run some sort of experiment.

Theo had avoided that sort of place for as long as he could remember, and he shouldn't have given in to Faylin in his moment of weakness. However, what was done was done, and there was nothing to do about it but wait for the potion to wear off. He certainly didn't think the healer could cure him of an overabundance of felines.

The street out in front of the shop had become more crowded while Theo and Faylin been inside. Considerably more people were staring at all the cats than when they'd gone in.

“Look at the cats, Mama!” a little faun child with two small, curly horns called out, standing in front of the florist shop with their parent. “One, two . . .”

Gritting his teeth, Theo resisted the urge to look back at the animals he knew were following him. He definitely didn't want to know the current number, so he picked up his pace to distract himself.

“Trust the process,” Theo muttered, his mood rapidly deteriorating.

“I count twenty!” the little faun shouted.

Theo winced.

Instinctively he twisted his head back to see the cats falling in line behind them, and his eyes widened. There looked to be *over* twenty.

“You might have jumped in anytime,” Theo complained to the lynx, who seemed unable to walk straight.

“I could tell you had it . . . under control,” Faylin said a little too loudly.

Doing his best to ignore the cats and the people on the street gawking at said cats, Theo asked, “You sure it wasn’t just that you had your face buried in catnip?” The question came out a little sharp.

The lynx raised his head up high. “You’re just jeeealous.”

Theo scoffed, but in all honesty, he kind of was. It would be nice to escape all the nonsense with a bottle of wine.

“You going to tell Arleta about all this?” Faylin asked, plodding along.

“Arleta?” Theo’s heart rate picked up as he halted and spotted the bakery right up ahead. His mind raced. If he told Arleta about the cats behind him *and* how they seemed to appear from nowhere, he’d have to tell her about the potion. And if he told her about the potion, he’d have to tell her the real reason he went to the spell shop.

That he was afraid to be a parent.

No way did he want to tell her *that*. He’d only even taken the potion because he didn’t want to tell Arleta what he was going through.

The entire thing was a fiasco.

Arleta was so excited about becoming a mom. He’d seen her joy for months . . . when she’d run her hand over the little clothes Doli had sewn for the baby, their planning for how to manage the café and bakery after the birth, the strange food cravings she actually seemed to relish. And so much more.

In the past, the subject of having a baby had always been a little touchy because of her parents’ passing when she was young. Many times they’d discussed her fear that she’d leave a child in a similar position. Alone and afraid. It was heavy, but Arleta had seemed to put the burden behind her. Theo didn’t want her to fret about his own parenting fears. He didn’t want to ruin everything for her.

After a quick, deliberate inhale, Theo snapped back to the present.

He needed to think and take stock of the situation.

“You can do this,” Theo muttered. He wasn’t very convincing.

Arleta knew about the five cats from that morning. Obviously the orcs knew about the cats from the yard, several of whom were back at the cottage. He glanced back again and immediately regretted it.

So. Many. Cats.

“What am I going to do with all these cats?” Theo said the words out loud but mostly for himself. The bigger question was, what if the cats kept coming? He quickly repressed that thought.

“What if you let them hang out in the new shop?” Faylin suggested.

“That’s a terrible idea.”

The lynx continued undeterred. “It’s not open yet. You could put them in the back for now.”

Theo stared at Faylin, who’d sat down and regarded him with his eyes half closed.

“Do you have a better idea?” the lynx asked.

Theo thought about it. If they would cooperate and stay there, it might at least keep them from following him everywhere and drawing attention. On the other hand, they were opening the shop tomorrow. But that was a problem for tomorrow, and Theo needed a solution for the cats today.

“See if you can take them around the back entrance into the storage room,” Theo said, hoping Faylin was both in the mood for compliance and lucid enough to do the job. “I’ll go in the front and shut the passway door to keep Arleta from coming in.” He winced. He didn’t like keeping secrets from his Fated. Particularly not big ones like this. “Just until I get everything settled.” These cats were not helping his anxiety at all.

Perking up, Faylin did a one-eighty and faced the cats. A low growl resonated in his throat, and then he let out a quick whine before leading the cats around the nearest building and off the main street.

“You can talk to them and didn’t tell me?” Theo called to Faylin, unable to believe how easily the lynx was herding the cats.

“Oh, that’s pretty much a universal call for felines,” Faylin said without turning back.

The last cat made its way around the building, dark striped tail held high, and Theo rounded to face the bakery again.

Several people had stopped on the sidewalk to stare.

“That was strange, right?” Theo said to them with a little wave. Not waiting for an answer, he walked to the door, trying to act natural.

“Theo,” Arleta said as he entered. Her eyes sparkled at the sight of him.

Thankfully the shop was empty other than Arleta.

“Sorry I didn’t bring you any lunch,” he said, flicking his eyes toward the passway. “I haven’t even had time to eat today.”

Laid out in front of her were dozens of what appeared to be shortbread cookies cut in rectangles. The golden cookies were speckled green, and Theo had a vague memory from that morning—which already seemed an age ago—that Arleta wanted to bake something lime-flavored.

“That’s okay. Doli brought me a sandwich earlier. But if you’re hungry, you’re just in time to give these a try,” she said, gesturing to the cookies. “My lime shortbread just finished cooling.”

Theo’s stomach rumbled loudly. “Those look great,” he said in an unusually high-pitched voice. He knew it sounded ridiculous and as if something was wrong. “I need to take care of something first in the new shop.”

Arleta gave him a quizzical look as she wiped her hands on a white cotton towel. “You okay?”

“Fine. Fine. I’ll be back in a shake.” Theo forced what he hoped was a halfway normal expression—although he knew he was a terrible liar—and walked through the passway. Once he was out of Arleta’s sight, he hurried toward the door leading to the back of the shop. He flung it open and found Faylin herding the cats inside. All around them were shelves filled with the supplies they’d ordered, like stacked pottery mugs, canisters of sugar and excess coffee beans and tea.

“We’re going to need a few . . . accommodations in here for the night,” the lynx said and gestured to a little gray cat. “I think he needs to do some business.”

Theo didn’t even want to think about cat business at that moment, and he held his hand out to quiet his friend. “Just give me a little bit.”

“I’m only the messenger,” Faylin said as he nudged the last cat through the door. “So don’t blame me if something happens.”

Judging that Faylin had the situation handled for the time being, Theo shut the door and hurried back toward the bakery. Before going around the corner again, he blew out a steady breath and straightened his back. “Look normal,” Theo reminded himself. He set a grin on his lips and casually closed the passway door behind him, hoping Arleta wouldn’t notice.

“Okay,” he announced, forcing his voice to remain steady. “Now where are those cookies? I’m starved.”

“Still right here.” Arleta gestured with her eyes toward the cookies that sure enough continued to lie on the countertop.

Theo walked around behind the counter. “I missed you.” He leaned in and kissed her straight on the mouth. The kiss was warm and soft, and Arleta didn’t resist him one bit.

He had indeed missed Arleta. Theo always missed his Fated when he wasn’t with her. He also wanted to distract her from asking about the closed door between the bakery and *Stay and Sip a While*.

He’d tell her about the cats but needed a little time to figure out just how to do it.

Theo broke from the kiss and smiled at Arleta. “So, is this the recipe you were telling me about this morning?” He reached for a piece of lime shortbread.

Arleta’s eyes brightened at the question. “I think they’re almost perfect.”

The cookies were certainly pretty, baked to a perfect golden color with specks of lime zest baked in. Theo brought the sugary treat to his mouth and took a bite. Immediately the buttery cookie melted, and the hint of lime was just right.

“They’re delicious,” he said, mouth packed with a second bite.

“You’re not just saying that?” Arleta gave him a shy eyelash flutter and twirled a loose strand of hair that had fallen from its coiled bun.

Theo stepped back and examined her. His Fated had a dusting of flour on her jawline, and he found her utterly endearing. She might have been fishing for a compliment, but he didn’t care. “I’ve never lied to you about your baking talent. *Everything* you make is magical.”

The back of his mind tickled with guilt for omitting the news about the multitude of cats next door.

“I think they’re pretty good too.” Arleta chose a cookie of her own and bit off a piece from the end.

Theo finished the last bite of his shortbread and realized one cookie wouldn’t be nearly enough to fill his hunger. But he also didn’t really want more cookies. He scanned over the offerings on the counter, leftovers from the previous day since the bakery was closed. Fortunately, one sausage roll sat perched on a stand. He leaned over to grab it and stuffed half the roll in his mouth. It was good to eat something savory.

Unfortunately the relief didn't last long.

Crash.

Theo flipped around toward the closed passway, nearly choking on his mouthful. The sound had definitely come from the cafe. *No, no, no! What is Faylin doing?* The worst possible scenarios played through his mind.

"What was that?" Arleta asked and started for the door.

Catching her arm with his free hand, Theo blurted, "Something probably fell in the back." He searched his brain for a plausible explanation. "There's a lot of overstock in there that I really should have stacked better. You finish dealing with the shortbread and I'll take a look."

Arleta's brow furrowed while she stood on her toes looking toward where the sound had come from. "I hope we don't have mice. That would be terrible for the bakery."

Theo forced a cheerful expression, thinking about all the "mice" in his storage room. "If we do, I'll ask them politely to move on." Still hungry, he popped the rest of the sausage roll in his mouth. "Be right back."

The quizzical look didn't leave his Fated's expression, so Theo swallowed his food and hurried across to the cafe, closing the door tightly behind him.

The back room was still closed, but rustling noises came through the door. Theo glanced back, hoping to the stars Arleta hadn't followed him, then ran straight to where the sounds came from.

Throwing open the door, he found Faylin attempting to sweep up the tea scattered all over the floor from a fallen tin. Most of the cats had settled in and were napping, but a few perched high on the shelves.

"Sorry about that," Faylin whispered, wrinkling his nose. "We had a minor accident." He looked up to a blue-eyed white and brownish gray cat that had striped markings similar to his own. The cat simply flicked his ear at Theo. "William wanted to see what would happen if the tea fell on the floor. I told him not to, but he did it anyway."

Annoyed at both Faylin *and* William, Theo asked, "How do you know his name?"

"I don't." Faylin had gone back to sweeping with his paw. "That's just what I'm calling him for now."

Theo's head shook in frustration. "Please keep it quiet in here if you can."

"Doing my best," Faylin said. "But they're getting hungry."

A frustrated breath left Theo's mouth before he could stop it. "I'm working on that." He closed the door and quickly made his way back to the bakery. "Just some tea that fell," he told Arleta. "I really need to get everything organized before tomorrow."

The second the words came out of Theo's mouth, they really hit him. His chest compressed. He was opening *Stay and Sip a While* the very next day . . . and there was a large clowder of cats in the back room that he needed to deal with first.

None of which was helping with his stress.

Trust the process indeed.

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CHAPTER SEVEN



The rest of Theo's day was a blur. Somehow he managed to feed the cats at the café, set up their litter boxes, convince Faylin to stay with them overnight by promising him three more catnip bundles, get home, make dinner, and take care of their five cat guests at the cottage—who were quite polite and knocked nothing off the counters like William had. Then he had to keep Arleta from going over to Verdreth and Ervash's, since the orcs would likely mention the other cats that arrived after she'd left for the bakery that morning.

Unfortunately he still hadn't figured out another place for them, so the only option he could see was to keep them in the storage room while he opened the café for its first day of business. All the while keeping anyone from finding out.

Doli and Jez had volunteered to help weeks before, and Verdreth had let them both off from their shifts at the bookshop. Arleta and Taenya would both work at the bakery and try to send customers over.

This was good. And bad.

Good since Theo would need the help to manage customers and prepare drinks. Bad because he'd have to keep everyone but himself out of the back room.

On top of that, he was running on no sleep because his eyes hadn't closed once the entire night. Partially due to his worries about the cats in the café,

but also because the entire family of guest cats had slept with them instead of in the second bedroom. The large ginger male had curled up between his legs with the tabby kitten. Mama calico had taken her spot beside his head on the pillow, and the other two kittens found comfortable spots in the crook of each of Theo's arms.

Finally giving up on the prospect of sleep, he moved the cats aside and rose before Arleta, kissed her goodbye, and headed to the shop before most of Adenashire woke.

Thankfully no more cats made an appearance along the way.

“Ready to work, boss!” Doli chirped as she came through the café’s front door, far too perky for the early hour.

Theo stood behind the counter wiping it down with a soft cloth. He hoped to the stars that Faylin would be able to keep the cats quiet for the day since Theo had given him the first of the three catnip bundles he promised. “Morning.”

The umber-skinned dwarf, styled to perfection in a yellow dress with embroidered coffee mugs all along the collar, was followed by Jez, whose white hair stuck up in multiple places. Her fluffy tail trailed along the floor behind her. The groggy fennex, who may or may not have been dressed in her pajamas, looked as if Doli had dragged her out of bed against her will. An entirely likely scenario.

Jez only grunted, but no one ever expected more from her that early in the morning. Then she sneezed.

“Sarson is coming at 8 a.m. sharp,” Doli said, speaking of her giant, blue-skinned gargoyle fiancé, who’d only recently proposed (the answer had been an immediate yes, of course). “He wants to be your first customer.” From her pocket she pulled a handkerchief that matched her dress and handed it to Jez, who flattened her foxlike ears on top of her head without even glancing her way.

“Thanks,” said the fennex. She blew her nose and flopped down on a chair at one of the tables against the wall.

A spider plant hung down from a shelf above her head, and Theo wondered if the fennex was allergic to some plant in the café.

In normal circumstances Theo would have been thrilled to have friends so willing to help him out and support his and Arleta’s new business . . . if he weren’t hiding twenty-plus cats in the back.

Part of him wanted to just come clean and tell them what had happened. The orcs already knew, sort of, but it seemed no one had talked to them yet. Most likely they were busy with their own new cats.

He wished he could just deal with the problem and move on. Creating stress for Arleta was not something he wanted to do in her current state—not that he ever wanted to add to her stress.

Doli skipped up to the counter. “What can we do to help?”

Jez now had her arms on the table with her head laid on top of them and eyes closed. So it would probably just be Doli helping for the time being.

Theo’s attention wavered around the café while he did his best to avoid looking at the storage room. The cozy place was ready with a spot for reading next to a wooden bookcase filled with books donated from *It’s About Tome*. The pillows on the couch were fluffed, the plants were watered, and the tabletops were cleaned. “How about you make sure there are no spots on the glasses?” He handed Doli a clean cloth from under the counter. He’d already wiped them hours before, but it would keep her busy.

“Sure thing!” She took the towel from him and began inspecting and wiping the glasses.

Blowing out a tired breath, Theo wasn’t quite sure what else to do until the shop opened. He’d been there for hours. The coffee and tea were brewing, the orange juice was squeezed, the apples were juiced, and Arleta had filled several plates with lime shortbread and other pastry options. Even so his stomach was rounding in fear that everything wouldn’t be perfect. To walk off his nervousness Theo came out from behind the counter and beelined for the exit to check the front of the shop.

“Where’s Faylin?” Jez muttered, suddenly awake again and looking around the shop. “I thought he’d be here for sure.”

The question glued Theo to the floor. “You know how he wanders sometimes,” he answered too quickly and let out a weak chuckle. “Perhaps he just wanted to get out of helping. Take a nap or something.” Theo’s lips stretched into a wide, forced grin.

“Cats are smart,” Jez mumbled and lowered her head back to her arms.

Not waiting for her to ask anything else, Theo hurried out the front door and took in a deep lungful of the morning air. Lanterns still lit the darkened street, and Theo stared at the magic flames made by fairies every night. Most of the colorful wood-sided shops across the street still had closed signs in their windows. After a moment he bent at the waist, rested his

hands on his knees and closed his eyes, heart pounding. It was all too much. Why'd he taken on so much in the first place? Becoming a father was enough of a commitment, but on top of it opening a café? He definitely didn't need dozens of cats he couldn't even talk to. Making sure Faylin was taken care of was plenty.

“You okay?” Sarson’s deep voice sounded from Theo’s side.

Theo shot up and straightened his back. “Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be?” The squeaky tone that came out sounded nowhere near as convincing as he hoped.

The dark-haired gargoyle stood illuminated by lantern light, with his large wings tucked tight to his back and arms crossed over his beefy chest. “Because you’re doing a lot of new things in your life right now, and change can be difficult.”

A nervous laugh erupted from Theo. “Oh yes. That.” He gazed around and up at the still-darkened sky. “It’s not eight yet, is it?” With everything that had been happening, Theo wouldn’t have been surprised if time had been altered too. “Doli said you were arriving at eight.”

“I thought I’d come early to help before the place opened,” Sarson said and leaned in as if telling Theo a joke. “Plus I figured it would get me first dibs on pastries from the bakery.”

“Oh, yes, yes,” Theo got out. “Good idea. There’s not much left to do, though. I’ve been here for hours already. Maybe you can keep Jez company.” He tipped his chin to the sleeping fennex on the other side of the shop glass.

“Not a bad idea.” Sarson chuckled and patted Theo on the shoulder. “You get some air out here for a few minutes. I’ll leave you to it.”

“Thanks.” Theo’s cheeks flushed. He was glad it was still dark so his friend couldn’t see the ruddy color they’d likely turned. “Will do.”

Sarson walked to the shop entrance and pulled the handle. Before the door closed, he greeted Doli and kissed her, then, as Theo had suggested, sat in a chair across the table from Jez. The fennex seemed to perk up for a moment but quickly put her head back down.

Theo raked his hand through his hair and studied the front of the café. The street lanterns cast their warm light on the *Stay and Sip a While* sign Ervash had carved for them. Theo particularly liked the line of assorted mugs he’d included beneath the shop name. It was a good sign.

Through the window the interior looked homey and comfortable, and he fervently hoped Adenashire would enjoy it. If all went well, he and Arleta would hire some help to run the shop, and Theo could simply oversee it as needed. He wanted to stay home with the baby as often as possible, although Verdreth and Ervash had both eagerly volunteered to watch them.

The plan had sounded so good until his emotions turned upside down.

For the moment Theo felt the cobblestone street beneath his boots, inhaled the crisp morning air, and relished the fact he had managed to get the shop ready to open on time.

After a series of breaths he walked back into the store. He just needed to get through the day. Then he'd deal with the cat problem.

"It really does look great, Theo," Sarson said, looking around at the space. He held both clawed hands around a steaming cup of tea.

Theo looked at Doli, who must have been standing on a stool behind the counter based on her taller height. "Did you make the tea?"

Doli grinned widely. "From scratch and everything. No magic."

The tea she conjured was always custom and delicious, but by her smug expression, the dwarf seemed particularly proud of making it the ordinary way.

"It's perfect, dear." Sarson held up his cup toward Doli as if in a toast.

"Of course it is," she stated plainly as if nothing else would have been acceptable. "But thank you."

The passway door opened, and both Arleta and Taenya came through.

Waking up, Jez stood immediately and walked over to Taenya. "Good morning." The fennex kissed the auburn-haired woodland elf.

When they parted, Taenya gave Jez a once-over but didn't say anything.

"PJ's are comfortable," Jez said and shrugged.

Taenya, who wore a comfortable-looking pair of cotton pants and a sapphire-colored button-up, twisted her lips. "I didn't mention it."

Arleta searched around the space, and her eyes landed on Theo. "We really did it. Even so, I wish you had woken me. I would have come in with you to finish the final setup."

"You needed your sleep," Theo said, gazing at her and remembering how she'd looked all curled up and comfortable in their warm bed. The vision was a pleasurable distraction.

She chuckled. "The cats did too. All five of them were passed out on your side of the bed when I got up."

“Five cats?” Doli exclaimed. She hopped down from her stool and came around the front of the counter. “What are you talking about?”

Theo didn’t have time to answer.

“Yeah,” Arleta said. “It was the strangest thing. A family of cats showed up at the cottage yesterday. They were hanging out in the barn and then just walked into the house with Theo. My dads even took one.”

Two, Theo thought but kept that to himself.

Doli’s brown eyes brightened. “The orcs have a cat now? I have to see that.”

“Yesterday there were a whole bunch of cats spotted around town,” Jez said.

Theo’s heart seemed to drop into his belly.

Sarson sipped his tea. “I heard the same thing.”

“You didn’t mention it,” Doli said, walking over to the gargoyle.

“I didn’t know it was important,” Sarson answered.

Arleta’s brow furrowed and she took Theo’s arm. “Isn’t that strange? Wonder where they came from?”

He gulped. “Yes. Very strange.”

Leaning in to give Theo a kiss, Arleta said, “Well, Tae and I need to get baking. We’re running a little late this morning.” She pressed her warm lips to his cheek and then tipped her chin to Taenya.

“Those cakes won’t bake themselves,” Taenya said.

Theo kept his eyes on Arleta as they went back through the passway. When she was out of sight, he caught something out of the corner of his eye —Doli reaching for the handle to the back room.

“You don’t need to go back there,” was the only thing Theo could think to say, but when it came out of his mouth, he knew it didn’t sound the way he wanted it to. The words had been thick with alarm.

“Oh, no bother,” Doli piped. “There are just a few dust bunnies in the corners I want to take care of.”

Theo was pretty sure there were no dust bunnies. Unfortunately, before he could stop her, the dwarf swung open the door and Faylin fell out into a heap as if the lynx had been pressing his ear against the door. He was covered in catnip.

“Oh. Hello.” Faylin whipped his attention up to Doli, who stood over him with her mouth open.

But she wasn't looking at Faylin. Doli was looking beyond him where at least twenty pairs of eyes belonging to cats of various shapes, sizes and color patterns were staring back at her.

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CHAPTER EIGHT



“Why do we have a bunch of cats in the storage room?” Arleta had come back into *Stay and Sip a While* with Taenya at her side.

“I have the same question.” Doli attention wavered between the cats, several of whom were strutting out of their accommodations, and Theo.

The elf stood frozen. This was not going at all the way he’d imagined. Though, to be fair, Theo had been trying *not* to imagine this particular scenario. He half turned to Arleta. “Um . . .”

Behind him Jez sneezed again. “I think I might be allergic to cats.” She honked her nose into the hanky Doli had given her.

Faylin had righted himself and sat licking the catnip off his back in a manner that suggested he had *not* just fallen out of the storage room in a thoroughly *unmajestic* fashion.

As Theo’s mouth struggled to form words, the cats continued to parade from the storage room and head directly to him. One cat, a white one with a dark striped tail and markings over his green eyes that made him look as if he had eyebrows, was the first to circle around Theo’s feet, giving his leg a headbutt each time he made a complete rotation.

Another, a large fluffy ginger who had an affinity for both second *and* third breakfast judging by her rotund shape, flopped onto her back and

waved her paw up at Theo as if asking to play. Her feathery tail swished along the hardwood floor.

Before long all the cats surrounded him, leaving no room for doubt among the watchers. The cats were there for him.

“Theo,” Arleta insisted. “What’s going on?”

Sarson and Taenya merely stood with stunned looks on their faces.

Wanting to tell them everything and nothing at the same time, Theo finally opened his mouth. He shut it again when a lovely, petite gray cat stretched her forepaws up onto his leg, then made several kneading motions before dropping back down to all fours.

Jez sneezed again and retreated to the farthest table. “You have a lot of cats, Theo.”

He did. Jez was right.

“It seems Theo is cursed,” Faylin said, holding his paw in the air in preparation to lick it.

“Cursed?” Doli looked at Theo. “What do you mean, cursed?”

Arleta gasped, her hands immediately moving to her bump. “Is he right? When did that happen?” Her hazel eyes seemed to plead with Theo to assure her it wasn’t true.

“I’m *not* cursed,” Theo insisted and hurried to her, jinking side to side to avoid stepping on any of the cats lounging on the floor.

In truth Theo really didn’t know whether he was cursed or not. He didn’t think so but couldn’t entirely rule it out, despite Ibus’s advice to “trust the process.”

“Then what is it?” Taenya asked. “How about you start by telling us why all these cats are in here?”

Theo scanned around the room at all his friends. He hated the way they were all looking at him, waiting for answers he didn’t really have. Steeling himself, he gulped and spoke. “I dropped into *Spells and Sortilege* two days ago.” He pinched his lips for a second while deciding what to admit in that moment. There were private things he didn’t want to tell anyone but Arleta, and now was not the time. “I was a little out of sorts . . . with the opening of the shop. Nervous. I only wanted to pick up something to help me feel better.”

“Did Ibus curse you?” Sarson asked, sounding a little shocked at the possibility.

Theo shook his head. "I don't think so . . . well, maybe?" He gazed around at the cats, two of which had jumped onto the counter and another who was already asleep on the couch, snuggled up to the pillows Doli had made. "I'm pretty sure whatever potion he gave me isn't working correctly."

"Due to all the cats?" Jez sniffed and wiped her nose with the hanky again.

"They were my first clue," Theo admitted. "I went back yesterday to complain, but he assured me the potion was working properly."

Taenya shifted her weight and crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, that doesn't sound right. Why would a potion brewed to take the edge off produce all these cats?"

"I have the same question," Theo said, sighing.

Arleta came to his side and took his arm. "You should have told me."

He allowed a weak smile. "Sorry I didn't mention it. I didn't want you to worry." He still didn't. If he told her the entire story, she would.

From the spot next to the counter, Doli gazed around the room. "Well, we need to do something about all this since we have a store to open."

"And baking to do next door," Taenya added.

"Maybe we should just put them back in the storage closet until we have a better solution," Doli said, then went to grab the broom. Several cats scattered when she brought it out.

"I don't think that's going to work," Faylin chimed in.

Theo bent down and picked up the eyebrowed cat who was rubbing around his legs again. "Why not? We just need to get through the opening, and then we can figure out what we can do."

The lynx wrinkled his pink nose. "They were all whining. I could barely keep them quiet."

"How about you take them back to the cottage?" Arleta suggested, immediately wincing as if it were a terrible idea.

"Don't forget, you've already got five over there." Doli didn't even look up from sweeping a wad of cat hair that had already formed on the café's floor.

"Seven," Theo admitted.

"Seven?" Arleta's voice rose at the end of the word.

Theo bit his lip as he hiked up the cat in his arms. "If you count the two your dads have."

Her eyes widened. “You mean to tell me they have another one now?”

“After you left yesterday morning, more cats showed up, and they took one in to be a friend to Checkers,” Theo said, realizing the story sounded ridiculous. “When I came into town, more showed up, and Faylin and I—” Theo glanced at the lynx.

“Don’t blame me,” Faylin groaned.

Theo flattened his lips at the lynx. “We decided to house them in the storage room temporarily.”

Morning sunlight made its way through the shop window and spread across the wall and floor. The colorpoint Faylin had named William yawned, stretched and ambled toward the sunbeam. He flopped down, licked his paw and rubbed it over his left ear to give it a good clean.

“This is interesting and all, but if we are going to open today,” Taenya insisted to Arleta, “we really need to get baking.”

Arleta pinched at the bridge of her nose for a moment, then addressed Theo. “Tae is right. Do you think the rest of you can handle this while we head over?” She gestured toward the open passway. “We’re already so behind.”

Sarson spoke up. “We’ll figure something out. You two go take care of your baking.”

“I agree.” Doli was still busy sweeping while a striped brown tabby swatted playfully at the broom bristles. “This can’t be *that* big a deal, right? They’re just cats . . . it’s not like baby dragons.”

Theo doubted a solution for so many cats would come easy, but again, he didn’t want to worry Arleta. “You go ahead. Don’t worry about us over here.” Eyebrows snuggled his white, whiskery face into Theo’s neck as if to agree.

Before she left, Arleta gave Theo a quick peck and patted Eyebrows on the head. “You take care of him, okay?” she told the cat in a half joking manner.

Theo was glad that at least Arleta didn’t seem upset by the cats . . . concerned, but not upset.

“I’m going with you.” Jez stood and blew her nose again, then eyed Theo. “Sorry, but all this sneezing isn’t helping anything, and they can use an extra pair of hands over there.”

Theo nodded.

Jez made a beeline for Taenya, and the three of them disappeared into the bakery.

“It’s a good idea to keep this shut,” Arleta called over her shoulder and shut the door behind them.

“I know they want to come out,” Sarson said, “but can you just ask the cats if they wouldn’t mind staying in the storage room for a bit while we open the store?”

“No go,” Faylin said. He flopped over onto his back, then twisted from side to side as if attempting to relieve an itch. “He already tried talking to them.”

“It’s true,” Theo said with a shrug. “I can’t hear them.”

Doli paused sweeping and looked around the space. “You know, what does it matter if the shop has cats? People can still get something to drink, right?”

Theo hadn’t thought of that. What if it wasn’t as big a deal as he’d thought? “It’s worth a try.” It was either that or keep the shop closed.

Sarson walked up beside Theo and patted him on the shoulder. “Of course it’s worth a try.” Despite his words, the gargoyle didn’t sound quite as confident as Doli. He was likely only trying to make Theo feel better.

“They *are* pretty cute.” The dwarf swished the broom back and forth over the floor and smiled as the little tabby scurried after it. “If that one was mine, I’d name it Shadow.”

Theo placed Eyebrows on the ground and asked, “You want to take him home?”

Doli gave Sarson a quick look. “We’d have to keep him at your house, since it seems like Jez is allergic.”

“You’ll eventually be moving there permanently,” Sarson said, shrugging. “You’re almost always there.”

Doli smiled at Theo. “Let’s talk about it after we get through this opening.” She gazed down at the striped cat. “I should also make sure Shadow actually wants to come home with us.”

The tabby flicked his tail excitedly and let out a little chirp before he went back to batting at the broom.

Sarson leaned down to Theo and whispered, “I suspect we are indeed taking a cat home.”

“I heard that,” Doli giggled.

So it was settled. At least for the shop opening, they would leave them be. Theo gazed around. The cats were all peaceful enough. Even Faylin had found a spot in the sun to curl up in so he could sleep off the catnip. Perhaps their appearance had nothing to do with the potion he'd taken and the whole thing was just a coincidence. It seemed unlikely, though, since cats had been appearing out of nowhere. The sensation of pressure on his chest lightened a bit. He looked down at Eyebrows, who had resumed his little dance around Theo's legs.

The door swung open and Verdreth stepped into the shop with Checkers riding on his massive shoulders. "Oh, goodness." He stopped short and swiveled his attention around the room, eyes wide. "A lot more have arrived." He swiped his hand through his silver-speckled black hair.

Checkers mewed, and the orc gently took the kitten from his shoulder and placed her on the ground. The tiny beast scurried toward the couch and jumped onto the cushion.

"It's gotten a little out of hand," Theo said, the chest pressure settling in again at the orc's slightly alarmed expression.

"We've got it under control," Doli said as she leaned the broom against the wall.

The dwarf sounded so sure of herself.

Verdreth walked over to the counter and looked up at the offerings on the board over Doli's head. His orcish features scrunched in thought as he adjusted his spectacles. After much studying, he announced, "I'll take a plain coffee. But with cream and sugar."

Doli giggled. "Coming right up, sir." She grabbed a cup from the stack and filled it with dark, steaming liquid. She dropped in a generous helping of sugar and topped it off with cream. "One coffee." She pushed it over to Verdreth, who plucked it from the counter and took a sip.

"Delicious. Next time I might try one of the fancy ones you have up there," the orc said. He set his cup on the counter and gazed around. "All that's missing are some pastries."

Theo tipped his chin to the empty pastry stand. "Arleta will bring those over as soon as they're ready. They got a late start due to all the"—he looked around—"cats."

Verdreth chuckled. "The addition of them certainly makes the place more interesting."

Theo couldn't disagree.

The door opened again and none other than Mr. Figlet walked in. "Hello," he called out. "I had to see the place since it's going to add a little competition to the market." He froze mid-stride and looked around the shop. "What's all this?" Alarm scrunched his adorable features.

"Just a few *guests*." Sarson plastered on a smile as he approached the often-crabby market owner. "What can we get you, sir?" The gargoyle placed his large hand on the marsupial's back and ushered him past the maze of cats to the counter where Doli waited to make a drink.

Theo stood watching the interaction. Mr. Figlet had quite a bit of influence in Adenashire, and in no way did Theo want to end up on his bad side. He also wanted to be a good host to all his customers, but the fact that his feet seemed suddenly affixed to the floor wasn't helping. As if he sensed Theo's distress, Eyebrows sped up his circling and headbutt dance.

"We have coffee, tea, fresh juice." Doli stood on the stool again and gestured at the pitcher of vibrant orange juice. "All the menu items are on the board. No pastries yet, though."

"Um . . ." Mr. Figlet started to look back at the exit as a black cat approached him.

"And it's on the house, since we're getting the hang of things," Sarson announced, pulling the quokkan's attention to him. "You're our first customer."

Suddenly a furry muzzle pushed against Theo's hand. Faylin was beside him.

"Act natural," the lynx said. "It's going to be okay."

Of course, just as he'd nearly uprooted his feet, two more customers walked in. Sarson and Doli were still working on distracting Mr. Figlet. Then the black cat jumped up on the counter directly beside the quokkan.

"Akk!" Mr. Figlet flinched back in horror so overdone that it had to be feigned. "Cats should not be on the counter in a café!"

Verdreth nabbed the black cat in his giant hands and pulled him close to his chest. "He's just learning his manners."

"Why are there so many cats in here?" asked the halfling woman who'd just come in, alarmed.

After eyeing Theo for a moment, Verdreth turned, cat still in hand, and spoke to the new customers. "The coffee here is delicious."

Paying no attention to him, the halfling turned to her partner. "There must be a mouse problem here."

“Oh, no,” Theo got out and started toward the customers. “There’s not—”
“A mouse problem?” Mr. Figlet whirled around. “This is unacceptable!”
He threw his hands up.

“Is the infestation at the bakery too?” the halfling man asked.

“No, no, no,” Theo said, throwing out his hands. “There’s no mouse infestation!”

Crash.

Everyone jumped at the sound. William sat on the counter next to the mugs, and below him one lay in at least a hundred pieces shattered on the floor.

Suddenly breath wouldn’t come into Theo’s lungs, and magic floated off not only his hands but also his neck. Three more cats he didn’t recognize ran from the storage room, darting directly toward him.

“This is unacceptable!” Mr. Figlet stormed to the door and pushed past the halflings.

They both shook their heads, turned around and left.

Theo’s eyes moved to the clock on the wall. It wasn’t even 8 a.m.

“What just happened?” Doli managed to ask as Theo raked his hands through his hair, trying to ignore the three new cats circling his feet.

“Theo?” Faylin sounded worried. “There’s something you should be aware of.”

Theo ignored the lynx, not wanting any more bad news.

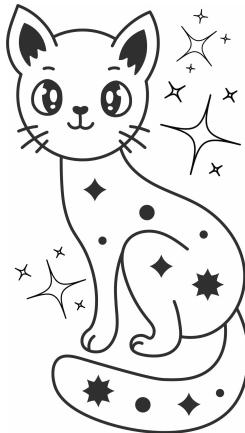
The door opened again and instinctively he twisted toward it, about to yell, *We’re closed!*

Instead he snapped his mouth shut at the sight of a tall blonde elf woman in an expensive floor-length green dress, hem puddling on the ground and sunlight beaming around her head.

She was ethereal.

Unfortunately she was also his mother.

CHAPTER NINE



Shalina Bryar stood inside the shop doorway in all her elven glory. Even the morning sun seemed to do her bidding by providing an immaculate halo at the crown of her head. Her crushed velvet dress boasted golden embroidered leaves along the cuffs and the high-cut neckline, and her long blonde hair cascaded over her shoulders like ocean waves.

In Langheim, where Theo had grown up, the look was commonplace. In Adenashire Shalina looked ready to attend a grand event. Not that there were many of those in the small village other than the party on the first night of the Yule Games. Even then no one wore anything so extravagant.

“Mother,” Theo croaked just as Eyebrows leaped from the floor and up into his arms. He absently caught the cat and settled him like he was holding a baby. “What are you doing here?”

Everyone else in the shop looked just as stunned as Theo. They’d all either met or heard stories about Theo’s mother—and the tales were rarely positive.

Faylin flicked his right ear and sniffed. “I told you there was something you needed to know.”

Shalina gazed around the shop at each of Theo’s friends, then at the cats sitting or lying on the floor, lounging on the couch or perched atop the counter. “Theodmon, what have you gotten yourself into this time?” Her tone was flat.

Theo's mind churned sluggishly. What in the world was his mother doing in Adenashire? She'd barely ever traveled outside of Langheim and had mostly thrown herself into her work heading up the Baking Battle. But the year before, after Arleta, Taenya, Jez and Doli had competed, Shalina had been quietly forced out due to unacceptable behavior.

There had never been a magicless human in the Battle before, but the elf council and other judges had seen that Arleta's presence made for a much more interesting event. People all around the Northern Lands had taken notice, and it had been the most popular Baking Battle in ages. The council had hoped Taenya, who'd won, and Arleta, who'd come in second, would join them as guest judges for the next competition. Both had declined, although neither had ruled out future invitations.

He realized that he'd never wondered how Shalina was handling the loss of her position.

And he'd been standing frozen, trying to process all those thoughts and questions while everyone waited for him to answer his mother. Luckily Doli stepped out from behind the counter with her hand extended and a wide smile on her lips. "So good to see you again, Shalina!" Her greeting was peppy and inviting, like bottled-up sunshine. Doli was good at playing interference in an emergency since she'd often had to do the same with her own family.

Theo's mother peered down her nose as Doli approached. Finally she spoke again. "Ms. Butter—" She squinted as if the action helped her think.

"Doli Butterbuckle." She grinned again with no indication of discomfort. "This is Theo and Arleta's expansion to the bakery." She gazed around for a moment, not dropping her extended hand. "As you can see, we're having a bit of a soft opening here."

With Doli's offered hand mere inches away, the elf finally reciprocated. "You competed last year, correct?"

"I did. Made it pretty far too," Doli chirped. "You were certainly a tough judge."

Shalina squared her shoulders. "I pride myself on being discerning."

"Well, of course," Doli said as the two of them continued to shake hands. "How else would you have gotten as far as you did?" The dwarf released her grasp and gestured to the nearest open table. "Have a seat. I'll get you a cup of tea if you like. Bergamot? You must have had a long trip."

Shalina tipped her head in interest, and she seemed to let her guard down slightly. “That’s my favorite. How did you know?”

“I have a knack for these things.” Doli winked, turned and caught Theo’s eye. She tipped her head toward his mother, indicating that it was his turn.

Still holding Eyebrows, Theo turned reluctant feet toward the same table and sat across from her. He stroked the cat’s head, and loud purrs resonated from its throat. “Mother, what are you doing in Adenashire?” he finally asked again.

Shalina leaned back in her chair and crossed her slender arms over her chest. “Because you are having a child and didn’t bother to write.”

It was true. Theo hadn’t told his mother yet. So how did she know? He ran his hand along the cat’s back a little faster, trying to alleviate the pressure bearing down on his chest. Luckily Eyebrows didn’t seem to mind. He gazed around the room. Sarson stood behind the counter helping Doli prepare the tea, and Verdreth seemed to have slipped out since he and Checkers were nowhere to be seen.

Shalina’s eyes dropped to the cat in Theo’s grasp.

He couldn’t see them, but he was pretty sure several cats had made their way under the table and were rubbing against his legs. “We should talk about this somewhere else—”

“Why *are* there so many cats in here, Theo?” his mother interrupted, glancing under the table.

Faylin took pity on Theo and approached. “Shalina, Theo needs a little air. How about the two of you take a walk, and he can show you around the town?”

Theo didn’t really want to show his mother around town.

“I haven’t had my tea,” she protested. Just then Doli hurried over and set a steaming cup on the table.

“Take it with you. Just return the mug when you’re done.” Doli’s lips spread into a generous grin.

Turning to Theo, Doli said, “Go, go.” She made a little shooing motion. “Sarson and I have everything handled here . . . and Verdreth just left for the bakery next door.”

On hearing the word “bakery,” Theo’s heart skipped. How would his mother being in town affect Arleta? “Yes, Mother. Take your tea and let’s go for a walk.” He placed Eyebrows down, the cat letting out a tiny, protesting squeak, then pushed his chair back and stood.

“That might be a good idea,” Shalina said. She plucked her tea from the table and allowed Theo to escort her out the door before any cats had a chance to follow.

As they walked past the shop window, several hopped up to the inside ledge and watched them leave.

“I can’t believe you didn’t write me that Arleta is pregnant. I had to find out thirdhand from my sister,” Shalina complained while sipping her tea. Her eyes snapped to the brew, and under her breath she whispered, “Ooh, this is good.”

So *that’s* how she knew . . . from the letters he’d written to his cousin Wyn. Word got around.

“Doli is the best at what she does,” Theo said, on the lookout for more cats as he and his mother ambled down the street.

“And you’re still avoiding me.” Shalina halted and turned to her son.

Theo twisted his lips for a moment and grounded himself before speaking. “Do you blame me?”

His mother’s eyes widened. “Whatever do you mean? I’ve accepted your choice of Arleta.” She flourished her hand out toward the nearest shop. “As well as moving to this . . . quaint town.” The words sounded as if they pained her.

Inside Theo’s eyes were rolling. “I didn’t *choose* her, Mother. She’s my Fated.”

Not every elf had a Fated, but the ones who did were considered extremely fortunate since the bond with the one they loved was said to be much stronger.

Theo’s father had not been Fated to Shalina.

“Don’t forget the part where you tried to pay her off not only to get her to leave the Baking Battle, but to never see me again,” Theo added.

An offended look momentarily scrunched Shalina’s delicate features and porcelain skin. “That’s in the past,” she said and took another sip of her tea.

“Is it?” Theo snapped.

“You are the one who’s angry right now,” Shalina said, keeping a bland expression. “I just wanted to see you.”

Theo inhaled deeply, acknowledging the cool air moving into his lungs. He eyed the activity on the street, which had picked up with pedestrians and horse carts. “I’m not angry. I’m only surprised. You really should have

written before you came.” He forced greater calm into his tone. “And I didn’t tell you what was going on. I should have, and I’m sorry.”

Theo didn’t really want to apologize. Nevertheless, he figured it might smooth things over, at least for the time being.

Shalina started walking again and sipped her tea. “Yes. Well, I’m here now. I went by your cottage, and you weren’t there. Your shirtless orc neighbor told me where to find you.” She brought her hand to her forehead in an overly dramatic fashion. “It’s been an endless journey from Langheim, and I don’t want to argue right now . . .”

Right now? Theo thought. *When do you want to argue then?* It always seemed as if his mother enjoyed arguing, but he kept the sentiment to himself.

His mother continued, “I left my bags with the orc—”

“Ervash,” Theo said. “He and Verdreth are like father-in-laws.”

Shalina arched her golden brow. “Yes, well, my bags are at the cottage. Perhaps you’d escort me back there so I can settle in.”

Elves were particular about their accommodations. Failing to provide them with a bed in one’s home was looked on as bad manners. Then again, his second bedroom was filled with cats and Arleta’s baking supplies, and he was absolutely certain that Shalina would not relish sleeping with a family of five cats and several bags of unground wheat. And *she* was the one who’d shown up announced.

Just in time, heavy footsteps sounded behind them and Theo turned to see Verdreth, sans Checkers. The orc had his meaty hand up as if to get Theo’s attention.

Theo let out a breath of relief for the distraction and opened his mouth to introduce them.

“Ms. Brylar,” the orc said, no longer looking at Theo. “How pleasant that you’re in town.” Before Shalina could reply, Verdreth held his arm out to indicate that she should come with him. “This morning has been incredibly *event-filled*.” He threw a quick glance at Theo. “Knowing how tiring it is to come all the way from Langheim to Adenashire, I’ve arranged for you to stay in the guest accommodations above my bookshop, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh,” Theo said before his mother could refuse. “Thank you, *Dad*.”

“Anything for *family*,” Verdreth answered.

Theo surmised that Verdreth, being exceptionally well-read, knew all about elven etiquette and had come to his rescue. Doli and Jez would be

uprooted, but he suspected they'd be more than willing to stay with their significant others.

"I guess that would be alright," Shalina said with rare tentativeness, likely caught off guard. "But my bags?"

"You met my partner, Ervash," Verdreth said, pushing his glasses up on his nose. "He's already brought your luggage into town. I'll escort you so that you can freshen up."

"Well . . . if he went to all the trouble . . ." Shalina brought her attention to Theo.

"Yes, yes," he said with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. "I think you'll find those accommodations much more spacious. Our cottage is a little crowded." Theo paused for a beat. "Why don't you meet us there tonight for dinner? Then we can talk about whatever you wish." He regretted the words the moment they tumbled from his mouth. Fortunately Verdreth's offer would give him time to talk to Arleta.

Shalina nodded. "That would be acceptable."

"Very well!" Verdreth boomed. "Then along the way, we can chat about how excited we are to become grandparents!"

Shalina's pale cheeks turned a bright shade of red as she snapped her attention to the orc's green face.

"We *are* practically in-laws, you know," Verdreth said. Her eyes flew open wide as he threw an enormous arm around her shoulders and gave a hearty squeeze. He led the startled elf away from Theo, already chattering about baby furniture in his deep voice.

As he watched them walk away, Theo was convinced that Verdreth was purposely trolling his mother.

Although it was petty, he didn't mind one bit.

CHAPTER TEN



“I wish you had told me you were so anxious about opening the café,” Arleta said as they stood in their cottage kitchen, where several green potted plants hung from the ceiling. She was putting the final touches on a white chocolate blackberry cake.

She and Taenya had decided to close the bakery for the day when they heard about Mr. Figlet’s comments concerning mice. That would give them time to help Theo deal with the cat issues . . . and his mother’s surprise visit.

With a fragrant beef roast in the oven Theo gazed out into the living area, where all five of his cat guests as well as Faylin lay sprawled on the rug as if none of them would ever leave.

“I know.” Theo sighed, stuffing his hands into his pockets and studying the floor. “But you have so much on your plate already. I didn’t want to bother you.”

Arleta stepped back, admiring the white frosted cake with plump, juicy blackberries piled on top. Apparently satisfied, she wiped her hands on a clean cotton towel and sauntered over to Theo. She turned his face toward hers.

“Look at *me*,” she commanded, then placed her warm hands on either side of his face.

He did, and she was beautiful. The loveliest person in the entire realm. Somehow pregnancy had made her even more so. Frankly, he *never* wanted to let her down.

“Now breathe in slowly, hold it, and then let it out,” Arleta whispered. “I’ll do it with you if you need me to.”

Tears burned at the corners of Theo’s eyes. He’d pent up so much in the months since Arleta had told him she was pregnant. Joy, fear . . . and everything in between. He nodded.

With great care Arleta slipped her hands under his arms and clasped his back. Theo returned the embrace. After a moment she took in a deep breath through her nose, held it, and then released the warm air out of her mouth. Theo joined her, and the two of them stood breathing deliberately and matching the other’s pace for several moments.

The breathing paired with Arleta’s body so close to him soothed Theo’s soul. At least for a moment.

“Last one,” Arleta whispered, and at the end of the out breath she raised up on her toes and pressed her lips to Theo’s. She smelled and tasted of vanilla and berries. The kiss was unrushed as they basked in the safety of each other’s bodies. Arleta’s growing belly pressed against him, and Theo couldn’t help wanting to lose himself in her touch and ignore the problems outside of their embrace.

Eventually, Arleta pulled back and rested her feet flat on the floor, keeping her fingers woven in Theo’s hair. “About your mother.”

Theo’s forehead furrowed at the mention of Shalina. “Can’t we go back to kissing again?”

Arleta flattened her expression. “We can if your mother isn’t arriving at any minute.”

“She is,” Theo conceded.

Arleta walked over to the oven and pulled open the door, leaning back as steam wafted into the air. “You really didn’t tell her I was pregnant?” she asked.

Theo was quick to answer since he in no way wanted her to think he’d been trying to hide it. “I didn’t want to deal with her. I didn’t want *you* to have to deal with her! Except . . .” He sighed. “It was a terrible idea, and I should have just faced it head on. I’m sorry. This was about me, not you.”

“I know,” Arleta said and closed the oven door. “It’s something we’ll just have to deal with together. She *is* going to be a grandmother.”

Theo gritted his teeth. As much as he'd never really thought of himself as a father, he'd especially never considered what his mother would be like as a grandparent. He groaned at the thought and held his hand out. "Let's simply try to get through tonight. And then the day after that."

"Then we can figure out what to do with the cats back at the *Stay and Sip*." Arleta chuckled and took his hand.

"Yes. That," Theo said, turning to the cats still asleep on the floor. "You're not mad about them?"

Arleta tipped her head and pursed her lips. "I do wish you'd told me about them right away instead of trying to hide what was going on. It's not as if you meant for it to happen."

A sigh left Theo's mouth. "I really thought Faylin and I had the situation under control." He rolled his eyes, remembering cats pouring out of the storage room at the shop and Faylin covered in catnip as if they'd been performing in a comedy production. "Obviously not."

"Obviously." Arleta kissed Theo and released his hand. "Now I need to set the table outside."

Behind the cottage, in the yard they shared with the orcs, sat a long table directly before the herb garden. Meals with company were shared out there unless the weather was bad.

Theo recaptured Arleta's hand before she got far. "Are you sure you're okay with my mother being in town?"

Arleta wrinkled her nose. "Of course not. But she's here, and since the woman is family, I'll have to get used to her showing up on occasion. At least she's not staying here."

"You can thank your dads for that one," Theo said, bringing the back of her hand to his mouth and kissing it. He gently released her, though he'd rather not have.

"Orcs to the rescue." Arleta giggled.

"What would we do without them?" Theo asked, smiling back at her.

She waved and said with a glint in her eye, "I really do have things to do and flower arrangements to make."

With that she turned on her heel, grabbed a waiting stack of plates from the counter and walked out the back door, leaving Theo to tend to his roast. He grabbed a potholder and opened the oven door. Inside waited the large, nicely browned roast surrounded with carrots and potatoes. It was a simple

meal he'd round out with a salad fresh from the garden and a roasted garlic loaf Arleta had brought with her from the bakery.

Shalina was used to much more extravagant meals back in Langheim, but there had been a time in their lives where she'd made warm, homey meals for him—and his brother and father. But that had been so long ago that Theo wasn't sure she even remembered those times.

Sometimes thinking about their life *before* was difficult for Theo too.

Satisfied that the roast was done, Theo brought it out and sat the pan on top of the stove. He covered it with a towel to keep in some of the heat but still allow the meat to reabsorb some of the juices and remain tender.

He moved on to preparing the salad, adding two types of hand-torn lettuce, a scattering of crimson baby tomatoes, snipped chives and a few pansies over the top for a finished look. The repetitive actions of preparing the food released the tension in Theo's shoulders. After that he made the vinaigrette, a simple mix of oil, vinegar, and a dollop of seedy brown mustard to bring it together, plus enough herbs, salt and pepper to round out the flavor.

Glancing over at the sleeping cats in his living room, Theo let out a breath of relief that Arleta hadn't been too bothered by the appearance of all the others.

Maybe it augured a good dinner. His mother would be cordial, enjoy the food with them, and go home.

Knock, knock, came from the front door and Theo's heart jumped.

Not a good sign.

As he began turning around, the big orange tom with his matching orange kitten, who'd both been sound asleep the last time Theo had checked, scampered across his feet and nearly tripped him.

“Oh, stars!” he cursed under his breath as he caught his balance.

Faylin popped his head up and said, “Is that her?” He sniffed the air toward the door, then he righted himself and rose. The other three cats stirred from their places on the rug.

“Theo?” Shalina's voice came from outside the door. “Are you home?” She knocked again, this time harder.

“It's her,” Faylin confirmed and walked to Theo's side.

“I'm coming,” Theo shouted and hurried to the door.

When he opened it, his mother stood on the stoop dressed in a long orange gown made of silk. Her hair was twisted up into an intricate braided

style. Theo didn't even want to think about how long it had taken for her to do.

"Hello, Mother," Theo said and looked down at his plain tunic with a grease splotch on the right side. He quickly grabbed a green vest he'd hung near the door and pulled it on to hide the stain.

Shalina looked from side to side and then at Theo. "This is . . . cozy."

Theo's neck tensed. His house outside of Langheim proper was not so different from the cottage he and Arleta shared. Of course, his mother had never thought much of that place either.

"We think so," Faylin said.

Shalina's eyes dropped to the lynx where he stood alongside Theo. "Hello, Faylin."

"Shalina," Faylin answered.

"Come inside," Theo said, opening the door wider. "Arleta is out back setting the table."

His mother held out a bottle of wine, which had been concealed by the folds of her dress. "I brought this from home."

Still off-kilter, Theo paused for a second before he took it and examined the label, which read *Starlight Vineyards*. He had met the elf wine maker once since Shalina often visited the vineyard. "A nice red. This should go well with our meal. Thank you."

"It's rude not to bring something to the host," Shalina said and walked inside.

Theo blew out a breath and placed his free hand on Faylin's head to calm himself.

After he shut the door, Shalina said, "I see you've continued the cat theme here as well as at your café."

The kittens tumbled across the slick floor while their parents looked on. At least none of them were underfoot anymore.

Theo definitely did not want to get into the reason for all the cats with his mother, so he decided not to respond. "Dinner is just about ready." He held up the wine bottle. "How about we take this outside, and you can get comfortable out there?"

Comfortable was likely an overstatement for all of them.

"Look at that cake." Shalina ignored Theo's invitation and strolled over to the blackberry-covered cake.

"Arleta made it," Theo said.

“It really is exquisite.” Theo’s mother visually inspected the top and sides. “Are these blackberries wild?”

Watching her, Theo was transported to his childhood when Shalina taught him about plants. “Um, I think so. Arleta probably picked them up at the outdoor market. One seller there specializes in berries.”

“She is a talented baker.” Shalina turned back to face Theo.

“You should tell her that, Mother,” Theo said.

Shalina softened her gaze momentarily, then cleared her throat. “Yes, well. You mentioned going outside?”

Theo led his mother and Faylin to the patio, where Arleta had already prepared quite a tablescape. A wildflower arrangement graced the middle of the table, complete with three smallish sunflowers. She’d woven flowering melon vines and herb sprigs between the plates and glasses but left plenty of spaces for the food. Twinkling fairy lights hung over the table, while a second bottle of wine waited with an opener.

Arleta came walking back from the garden with a few more flowers and stopped short, looking at Theo. “Oh! I wasn’t expecting you yet.” Then her gaze turned to Shalina.

“Hello, Arleta,” Shalina said, her eyes dropping to Arleta’s stomach. “You’re looking . . . pregnant.”

“Um. Yes.” Arleta’s hand slipped over her belly. “Welcome to our home . . .” She paused with a slightly perplexed look on her face. Theo realized they’d never discussed what she was going to call Shalina.

“My mother brought us a bottle of wine,” Theo interjected and held it out toward Arleta.

“Thank you so much.” Arleta quickly tucked the extra flowers into the centerpiece and gestured to the spot at the head of the table. “If you’d like to have a seat, I can bring out the food.”

Arleta’s invitation was affable, but there was a waver in her voice that made Theo want to speak to her and make sure she was really okay. He turned to Shalina. “Yes, have a seat. Arleta and I will bring the food out.”

“No, no, no.” Arleta held her hand out and shook it at the air. “You and your mother sit. I’ll take care of everything.”

Theo’s shoulders tightened. He and Arleta were partners, but her tone and expression were firm. He gulped. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” With that, Arleta hurried inside the house.

“I’ll go with her,” Faylin said, not waiting for Theo’s answer.

After a brief pause Theo directed his mother to sit and opened the wine. He poured a portion into waiting glasses, then gulped down his entire serving before he even sat.

“You don’t need to be afraid of me, Theo,” Shalina said as she sat sipping her wine. As if light followed her everywhere, the fairy lights cast a glowing halo around the top of her head.

Pouring a second glass of wine and silently vowing to sip this one, Theo forced his lips up in an arch. “I apologize for not writing. The circumstances we left under . . . weren’t the most positive.”

“But I have written to you,” Shalina said. “I’ve told you I’m coming to terms with your . . . relationship.”

Theo leaned his elbows on the table to get closer to her. “Coming to terms is *not* embracing . . . or even accepting.”

Shalina’s gaze dropped to Theo’s elbows, and he immediately removed them from the table. He regretted the choice immediately but didn’t put them back.

“Your relationship is highly . . . unconventional,” Shalina said, taking another sip.

“We like unconventional.” Arleta was back with the platter of roast and vegetables in her hands. She placed it on the table.

Theo eyed his mother, then the roast. It did look delicious, expertly cooked, and the vegetables had the perfect amount of caramelization. “We enjoy the life we’ve made together.”

“Yes,” Shalina said, her wine still in hand. “That’s obvious.” She smiled and gestured to the food with her free hand. “This looks delicious.”

“It should,” Arleta said. “Theo’s a great cook.”

Shalina set down her glass. “You made the dinner?”

“I’ve been making my own meals since I was ten, Mother,” Theo said.

Shalina winced. The reaction was minute, but Theo saw it and regret prickled his chest. He did not want to make things worse between him and Shalina.

“There are still a few things inside,” Arleta said, breaking the awkward silence. “I’ll be right back.”

“Theo,” Shalina said when Arleta had gone, “child-rearing isn’t easy. I did my best.”

Theo was pretty sure his mother had not done her best, or even attempted to.

Before he could reply she said, “For instance, what if your child doesn’t have magical abilities?”

Theo leaned back in his seat, stunned at his mother’s question.

“What if they do?” Arleta’s voice came from their side. “Will it matter either way?”

She was approaching with the salad and bread. She plunked them down, rattling the wooden table slightly. Faylin walked beside her, licking his lips.

“You’re magicless,” Shalina said bluntly to Arleta. “You don’t have the same expectations Theo might have.”

Time seemed to slow down as the horrible words exited his mother’s mouth. Everything inside Theo wanted to stand up and tell her to leave and never come back. But he couldn’t. His mouth and body seemed frozen in place.

Suddenly all five of the cats from inside jumped up on the table and zigzagged around the food and décor toward Theo.

“What did you just say?” Arleta demanded.

“You’ll never understand what it’s like to be an elf, Arleta,” Shalina announced and stood. “How are you going to properly parent this child?”

Even in the dim light Arleta’s bright red cheeks were obvious.

“I think you need to leave.”

The words were apropos, but unfortunately they hadn’t come from Theo’s mouth or even Arleta’s. Faylin butted the back of Shalina’s legs.

“Get out,” the lynx growled again.

Under the glow of the fairy lights, Arleta and Theo stood silently as Shalina and stormed away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Theo and Arleta stood outside avoiding each other's gaze for what seemed like an age. Theo's stomach gnawed at him until two words finally escaped.

"I'm sorry." The apology exited his mouth so quietly that Theo wasn't sure at first that he'd said it aloud.

"Sorry?" Arleta flipped around to him and asked, bitterness in her tone. "How can she really be that awful? How is she your mother at all?"

That was a question Theo had asked many times over the years. How could his mother be that awful? How had she ignored the love and guidance he'd needed growing up? For so long it had been just the two of them until Theo was unable to stay any longer. How did she not see that Arleta was going to be the best mother to ever exist? Their child would never have to question their place in her heart no matter the person they would grow to be.

He reached out to her, wanting to tell her how amazing he thought she was every day . . . every minute. But she drew away from him.

Arleta hadn't pulled back from him in a long time, and emptiness chilled his veins. Theo wanted nothing more than to fulfill every need and desire his Fated had . . . and he had failed her.

He knew that, but the words that might heal her wound wouldn't come. *I'm sorry* was the best he had in him, and it wasn't enough.

“Why was it Faylin that had to tell her to leave?” Arleta asked, wrapping her arms around her torso as if she needed something to keep an extra sliver of distance between them.

“It should have been me,” Theo admitted. “I should have protected you.” He took one step toward her.

Lip quivering, Arleta turned away again and took several steps toward the garden. “I know I didn’t say so before, but you should have written her that I was pregnant, Theo. You needed to have this conversation with her months ago. I thought she was trying to accept the life we have together . . . but apparently I was very wrong.”

When Theo had first moved to Adenashire, he had exchanged a handful of letters with his mother. He could see how Arleta might have thought Shalina was *trying*, but he knew his mother better. At that point it had been easier to stop answering her correspondence and hope the problem would go away.

Of course it didn’t go away. Those things never do.

No magic would rid anyone from their traumatic experiences or open their minds to walk in someone else’s boots.

Life didn’t work that way, and anyone who said so was lying. Repairing wrongs took work. Actual work. Painful work.

Work he hadn’t been willing to do. Or willing to challenge his mother to address.

“I need to be alone for a while,” Arleta announced. Without waiting for a response or looking back, she walked straight into the cottage.

Tears burned at the corners of Theo’s eyes, and this time he let them fall. He felt like a failure . . . like his world was crumbling apart.

“The evening didn’t go very well.” Faylin’s muzzle pushed into Theo’s palm, rubbing his ears and horns over the skin.

Theo hadn’t even noticed when the lynx returned from escorting his mother out. “Understatement of the age,” he got out, tears soaking his face.

Deep, rumbling purrs came from Faylin’s throat, and he nudged his face across Theo’s leg several times. “How about we take a walk?” he finally said. “We don’t have to talk if you don’t want to.”

The cat was often haughty and demanding, but he was also a good friend. One Theo didn’t know how he’d survive without.

Theo gazed out over the moonlit garden, and a sort of music came into his ears. It was a strange music, unlike anything else in the realm. But then

it was also familiar, and he'd welcomed it for as long as he could remember. The song of plants called to him, and hardly even realizing he was doing so, he walked toward the sound. As he approached them, Theo reached out to the hydrangea vines clinging to a wooden trellis and ran his hand over the leaves. Colorful magic sparked from his fingers, and his mind connected to the foliage.

For Theo, communicating with plants was not the same as it was with most animals, just as communication with people was different from animals. Plants were all memory and emotion. They transferred stories and history from their seeds and the soil into the recent growth, and he'd share his own with them.

This garden always brought pictures into his mind about Arleta's family and her youth before her parents had died. Ghostly talk and laughter rang through the night air, telling of the love that had once been shared on this land, and how magic had existed . . . between humans.

Humans were magicless, at least as everyone understood magic in the Northern Lands. But Theo was positive that the magic Arleta held was greater than anything anyone had seen.

The plants told him the same, filling him with warmth. What if humans *did* possess magic in their blood? Not everything was known about magic, after all. Perhaps it simply manifested differently in humans.

It was only a theory he held, yet the plants supported it. And plants had never lied to him.

Theo knew Arleta was magic. If his mother was unable to see that, it was entirely her loss.

Was it time to release her entirely? That was a question Theo didn't know the answer to. Shalina was the last real tie he had to Kellam. All other threads were gone. Everyone else who had known him had moved on since he'd died so long ago.

His father certainly had.

The thought stung at Theo's chest. After Kellam was sick for so long and finally passed on, his father had waited mere months to leave, never to be seen again. The elf had been weak.

And after Theo's inaction that night with Shalina . . .

A damning pang stung at his chest like bees.

"Am I that weak too?" The desperate whisper escaped his mouth, and his connection with the plants broke.

Theo's consciousness came back to the space around him, and his sparkling magic lit the air as strongly as he'd ever seen it. The shimmer intertwined with the garden's vines, leaves and flowers as far as he could see, making each appear to be glowing from within.

Faylin lay beside him on the ground, ever faithful, his eyes half closed but watching and protecting his friend.

Grief clung. Grief endured. Grief sometimes made people into the monsters they feared most.

A shuttered breath left Theo's lips. He didn't want to be that monster . . . but wasn't sure he had the strength to resist its call. The only father he'd ever known wasn't able to.

A pair of warm hands slipped around his waist, and Theo let out a whimper.

"I won't leave you to deal with this alone," Arleta cried from behind him.

Theo turned and dropped to his knees before his Fated, the one he loved with his entire being. He ran his hands around her and held her belly close to his face. "You're right about everything," Theo mumbled into the fabric of her dress, tears silently flooding his cheeks.

Arleta bent and lowered herself somewhat awkwardly to one knee so they were face-to-face among the still-flickering magic. "I know. And we need to talk about what's going on. But not tonight. I love you, and we'll get through this together."

"How do you know?" Theo sobbed.

"Because, Theodmon Brylar," Arleta said, "that's what we're meant to do. It's what we've always been meant to do. It's what my dreams tell me night after night."

With that she pressed a long warm kiss into Theo's forehead, and they stood up. He didn't think he could possibly be more thankful for Arleta. She'd far exceeded the mystery woman he'd met in his dreams before they'd set eyes on each other in real life.

"Just promise me you're going to deal with this," Arleta said.

"I will," Theo promised.

She nodded. "But for now we have more pressing issues." Arleta wrinkled her nose and took his hand.

Theo's eyes widened. "A more pressing issue than what happened tonight?"

She looked back toward the cottage. "Yes."

Something inside told him not to look, but he suddenly had a good idea what was there.

Gulping, he slowly turned his head and found the five cats they'd taken on as house guests perched on the table making a meal of the roast. But at least ten more had joined them, ambling and stretching their way around the yard.

"I think the more distressed you become," Arleta said, "the more cats arrive."

Theo studied the new arrivals. "I'm surprised there aren't more." It wasn't a joke.

"This place is getting a little too crowded for my taste." Faylin stood and arched his back high. "How are you supposed to guarantee on-time meals and a spot to spread out on with all these . . . guests? I'm concerned the service around here is about to get a little iffy."

CHAPTER TWELVE



“They just appear like that?” Arleta bit into a piece of toast spread with butter and horseradish as she and Theo sat eating their breakfast. “Out of nowhere?”

Exhausted the night before, the two of them hadn’t talked much and simply went to bed.

Theo let out a sigh and picked at his own toast. “Ever since I took the potion at *Spells and Sortilege*.”

His mind was still on his mother’s horrible behavior. However, the fact that there were now fifteen cats at the cottage as well as twenty at the shop had to take precedent.

The black and white kitten from the original five sat on the tabletop watching Arleta’s every move and flicking his tiny tail, while Faylin lay sprawled on his bed, sharing it with a gray striped tabby Theo had never seen before.

Two matching black cats stared at him through the living room window. The sun, just starting to peek over the horizon, cast a pink hue on their backs.

Theo wished he could go back to bed, then wake up and find all his problems had vanished. At least Arleta wasn’t mad at him anymore, though he knew there were still words to be said between them.

Arleta pursed her lips in between bites. “What if you tried to go back again to fix it? I can’t see how cats appearing from nowhere are supposed to relieve anyone’s anxiety.”

“Rude,” Faylin called out without opening his eyes.

“I don’t either, but Ibus said the potion had to take its course.” Theo raked his fingers through his hair, frustrated that was the only answer he had.

“How many cats are considered to be a *course*?” Arleta reached for the jar of horseradish and spooned an extra dollop on her toast.

Theo shuddered and pinched at the bridge of his nose. He hadn’t allowed himself to wonder how many cats might arrive on his doorstep before the potion *took its course*. “I can’t answer that.”

Bam, bam. At the sound from the door, the cats scattered throughout the cottage.

“One of your dads, I’m sure,” Theo muttered. “Ask them if they want a few more cats.”

“You can do that.” Arleta took a quick sip of her tea and stood. “Coming!” she called.

When she opened the door, both Verdreth and Ervash stood outside. The two black cats from the window zoomed past them into the cottage.

At least Theo hoped they were the same pair he’d just seen.

“These are yours, I assume,” Verdreth said, with Checkers perched on his wide shoulder.

Apparently that was how the cat was going to live her life.

Patches pranced inside, her head held high as both orcs entered the cottage.

“They’re all ours.” Theo waved his hand in the air.

“Morning, Dads,” Arleta said, pinching her lips into a kiss at Ervash. He wore a loose-fitting white linen shirt cut low to reveal his muscled green chest.

The orc bent to let her reach his cheek and she kissed it. His lips quirked into a goofy grin against his tusks.

“Want some more?” Theo stood, leaving his toast uneaten.

“Oh, I think two are quite enough,” Verdreth said. “Both Checkers and Patches had us up late last night playing under the bed, then up early to serve them breakfast.”

“My baby girl wouldn’t ever do such a thing.” Ervash swiped Patches from the floor and brought the cat up to his face. “Would you, my love?”

The cat licked his wide nose with her rough pink tongue.

“Yes,” Verdreth said, pushing his glasses up on his nose. “Yes, she would.”

Ervash shrugged and placed the tortie back down on the floor. “You’re right.”

“But the cats aren’t the reason we’re here,” Verdreth said, his expression turning more serious. “I was still at the bookshop last night when your mother came storming back, swearing up and down. She slammed the back door so hard that several books at the *front* of the store fell from the shelves.”

Theo gulped and walked to Arleta’s side. “What did she say?”

“It was a jumble,” Verdreth replied. “However, the cursing was mostly about you. What happened?”

Theo was glad that whatever she’d said was about him. If the orcs had known what Shalina said to Arleta, they wouldn’t be in such a good mood.

“She came over last night for dinner.” He shot a quick glance at Arleta. “We had words. Did you happen to hear if she was leaving?” Theo quickly added the question so the orc might not ask the details of the fight. Plus, so much of him wanted her to leave town and never speak to him again. It would make everything so much easier. Of course, that would mean continuing to avoid dealing with his problems.

He knew his mother, though. She would want an apology from him and was unlikely to leave Adenashire until she got it.

“I don’t know,” Verdreth said. “She stormed up the stairs and slammed the apartment door without a word to me. And I haven’t gone in yet to open the shop.”

“Well,” Arleta piped up, “thanks for the update. We have to go into the *Sip and Stay* and figure out the cat situation.” She swiveled her attention around the room. “Unfortunately, more showed up last night, so the problem keeps growing.”

“Maybe we *could* take another one.” Ervash had bent down to pet the same gray tabby that had been asleep with Faylin a few minutes prior.

“Take two,” Faylin called from his bed. “That one might have a twin around here somewhere.”

Ervash looked at his partner, hope sparking in his eyes.

But Verdreth vehemently shook his head while Checkers clung onto his tweed vest. “We can’t have any more.” He reached up to his pocket below the kitten, drew out what looked like a dried piece of meat and handed it to Checkers. She had the morsel gone in two seconds flat.

“I thought you said we were out of treats?” Ervash complained, scowling.

“That was the last one.” Verdreth shrugged while Checkers mewed and stretched down to dig her paw inside the pocket.

Arleta broke from Theo. “Okay, Dads, time for you to go. We have a lot to deal with this morning.” She nudged them out the door but not before the twin black cats raced out again, tails held high. She closed the door behind them all.

Theo wanted someone to remind him again how all of this was supposed to reduce his stress. He muttered, “Trust the process, my a—”

“Ask me if I need my breakfast.” Faylin came up beside Theo and butted his leg.

“Yes, yes,” Theo said. “You and everyone else around here.”

Several cats meowed from the living room as if to agree.

“I was here first,” Faylin reminded Theo.

The elf groaned. “I’m well aware.”



With everyone fed, Theo and Arleta finally made it out of the cottage and into town with fifteen cats plus Faylin in tow. The two black-furred twins brought up the rear. Theo did his best to ignore the quizzical looks from passersby.

Outside the bakery, Taenya was ripping down a cream piece of paper nailed to the wood beside the door.

“What’s that, Tae?” Arleta hurried toward her, and the elf tried to stuff the paper in her pocket surreptitiously.

“Nothing,” Taenya insisted.

A bit of the paper stuck out of her pocket. Arleta snatched it.

“It’s nothing we can’t deal with,” Taenya said, grappling for the paper, but Arleta turned away and opened it. Theo read over her shoulder.

Mouse Infestation, the announcement read in bold lettering at the top of the page.

“It had to be Mr. Figlet,” Theo grumbled.

“We don’t have any mice,” Faylin said.

Arleta pursed her lips. “It doesn’t matter. No one is going to come to the bakery or the café today.”

Through the window they could see several cats running around, followed by Doli with her arms outstretched. Jez and Sarson sat at a table having pastries and hot drinks.

“Why are they here?” Theo asked Taenya.

She shrugged. “They all want to help with the cats. Jez even brought a stash of hankies so she could stay a little longer.”

“I need to have a little talk with Mr. Figlet,” Arleta said darkly.

“He’s just trying to send more business to the market today,” Taenya said. “Let him. This whole thing is going to blow over.” As if she’d just noticed something, the elf angled herself to look around Arleta, and her green eyes widened at the sight of all the new cats.

“We brought you a few more,” Faylin announced, swishing his tail.

Taenya straightened her back and smiled. Theo was pretty sure it was forced. “The more the merrier.” She let out a nervous chuckle.

“I’m not sure I’d go that far,” Theo said and pushed open the bakery door, allowing all the cats inside.

Doli’s eyes widened at the sight. “Oh, you brought kittens too? How fun.”

The original set of kittens ran toward the dwarf, tumbling over each other and crashing in a soft, furry pile at her feet. Their parents sauntered behind them, tails intertwined.

The passway door to the café was open, and cats flowed freely between the spaces.

“What are we going to do?” Arleta asked, looking around.

“We were just talking about that,” Sarson said and raised his mug to his lips.

Theo noticed that Jez had a hanky stuffed up one of her nostrils.

Sarson continued. “People just need to know the *Sip and Stay* is open. Pretty much everyone in Adenashire loves the bakery—except Mr. Figlet,

of course.”

Arleta still had the notice in her hands. She looked at it again and said, “I don’t even think this is official. But I’m pretty sure it’s Mr. Figlet’s handwriting. I’ve seen plenty of his bills for our bakery stall.” Angrily she balled it up and tossed it to the floor. A cat immediately grabbed it and threw it up into the air. Another ran underneath the flying ball of parchment and frantically looked back and forth as if trying to figure out what to do next.

“Some people just need a little encouragement,” Jez said and blew her nose again.

Taenya sat down beside her. “You know you don’t have to stay.”

The fennex shook her head, and though her ears lay flat she said, “I’m staying.”

Theo paced, trying to figure out some other place he might be able to keep all the cats. Perhaps Ibus wouldn’t mind stashing them at *Spells and Sortilege* until the *process* was complete. Since he made the mess in the first place.

“What if we made some coupons?” Theo said, the thought slipping out before he even realized he had it.

“Now that’s an idea,” Doli said with a spotted cat draped over her arm. “Like buy one, get one free? Buy a drink, get something to eat?”

“I like it.” Arleta slipped her arm around Theo’s waist.

“There are quite a few pastries left over from yesterday since we closed early,” Taenya added. “That might not be a bad idea.”

“We could head out to the market to give them out,” Sarson said. “Make them good for today only.”

Jez stood and sneezed. “I’ll go.” She wiped her nose with a new handkerchief.

Doli chuckled. “Since you’re the best salesperson among us, right?”

The fennex glared at the dwarf briefly and shot her a fangy grin.

Theo was glad for any distraction from his mother. And if it helped bring customers to the café, he was willing to give it a try. Theo went behind the bakery counter to pull out a stack of ivory paper and two pairs of scissors from a shelf below. “It’s worth a shot. We can make an assembly line.”

“That’ll show Mr. Figlet,” Jez growled and then sneezed twice.

As Theo’s mind whirled with hope and uncertainty, a long-haired gray cat with a fluffy tail rounded his legs. Almost instinctually, he bent down and

ran his hand along the length of the cat's body. Although he wasn't sure he wanted to *show* Mr. Figlet, the coupon idea was good and might get a few people in.

With any luck, someone would take a *cat* home with their coffee.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Coupons in hand and both shops closed, the group made their way toward the market along the cobblestoned main street of Adenashire.

Faylin stayed behind to watch most of the clowder back at the shops. But Theo had a suspicion that it might be to get another meal from the cat bowls set up in the storage room. The lynx had been complaining about second breakfast again before they'd all left.

“*Sip and Stay a While!*” Doli sang out and handed a slip of paper to the nearest woman. “Opens at 10 o’clock this morning. Get a free pastry with any drink purchase.”

The woman looked down at Doli and then drew her gaze upward to Sarson’s tall frame as she took the paper.

“The café is just back there,” Sarson pointed. “Next to *A Little Dash of Magic Bakeshop*.”

Theo gazed down at the stack of coupons in his hand and wondered how long it would take to give them all away. Despite the coupons being his idea, he couldn’t help wishing he’d stayed behind with Faylin. Normally Theo was a good salesperson. He had often run the bakery booth at the market and made a lot of sales. Complicating matters was the procession of cats trailing behind him, and he didn’t want to spot his mother. But since she wasn’t the type to walk aimlessly in an unfamiliar village, being out was a minor risk.

From the size of Jez and Taenya's stacks, it seemed they'd handed out more than Theo already.

"Do you know if any more have shown up since we left the house?" Arleta asked Theo as she handed a minotaur man a coupon. "We open at ten this morning," she told the minotaur as he eyed the line of cats behind them.

"I don't think so," Theo answered quietly, smiling at the potential customer who had already stuffed the paper in his pocket and walked away.

Arleta sighed and pulled out a handful of papers from her skirt pocket. She handed out another coupon to an ogre holding a large basket overflowing with vegetables from the market. "Hope you can join us today!" After a sweet smile, Arleta turned her attention back to Theo. "Do you think they'll all just leave when everything settles down?"

Theo wasn't sure when or even *if* everything would settle down. The baby was coming in a few months, which would probably mean more stress, not less. But he certainly didn't want to say that to Arleta right then. "I don't know. The cats won't communicate with me, so I can't ask."

"Don't you think that's strange?" Arleta asked. "Do you think they can't or won't?"

Theo hadn't even considered that the cats might be giving him the silent treatment.

"Hey," said the ogre who Arleta had given the coupon. "Isn't this the place with all the mice?" He held up the paper. "I heard someone talking about it."

Arleta turned to him and deadpanned, "We've got *way* too many cats to have a mouse problem."

"Cats?" The pink-skinned ogre's brows rose high up his forehead like two caterpillars perched on his face.

Theo was pretty sure he was one of the bartenders at *The Tricky Goat*, Adenashire's local inn and pub. The sight of him made Theo thirsty for a drink in the booth tucked into the far back corner. Plainly it was a little early to start in on the ale. To get his mind off it, he gestured to the cats following him. "Yeah. They're like little four-legged ambassadors. I think they're good luck for the place."

"Really?" The ogre eyed the coupon still in his meaty hand.

"We open at ten," Arleta reminded him. "Don't miss it."

Neither of them stuck around to see if he had any other questions.

"Good luck?" Arleta said as they made their getaway.

“It’s the first thing I thought of,” Theo chuckled. He felt lighter for some reason.

As they got closer to the market entrance, pleasant scents wafted toward them. His stomach grumbled, and he remembered that he hadn’t eaten once again. And that had been happening *far* too often in the last several days.

Could that be what was wrong with him?

Smoky meats, buttery popped corn, and yeasty bread entwined with a hint of the sweetness of dried fruits. The mixed aroma called to him as he ran the stack of coupons through his fingers. Trying to distract himself from the food, he looked down at them. The top paper read: Come to the *Sip and Stay a While*. Choose a sweet pastry treat with any drink purchase after 10 a.m.

Doli had drawn a cute little cupcake and mug at the top of the paper. Seeing it, Theo wished he were drinking tea and eating a cupcake instead of handing out coupons. But the faster they distributed them, the sooner he’d get back to the shop for a snack—and hopefully get some customers in.

“You can’t be in here,” called a voice from behind them just as Theo was reaching out to give a human man a coupon.

Both Theo and Arleta whirled toward the voice.

Mr. Figlet. The market owner had a scowl ruining his perfectly adorable features, and his paws sat squarely on his hips.

“Why not?” Theo said, immediately becoming protective of Arleta since she and Mr. Figlet had plenty of words in the past . . . or possibly it was the hunger talking.

Likely both.

A striped cat behind him hissed and flattened his ears at the marsupial.

“Because you didn’t pay for a booth today,” Mr. Figlet admonished but stepped back from the angry cat. “To hand out coupons, you must be a paying vendor.”

Arleta scoffed. “Maybe you shouldn’t accuse our shops of having mice unless you have some proof, Mr. Figlet.”

Mr. Figlet pulled back his head as if offended. “I didn’t say your bakery had mice.”

Theo sneered. “*Your* handwriting was on the complaint nailed to the door.”

The marsupial straightened and pulled at the lapels on his wool jacket, giving away his guilt. “I was only looking out for the safety of Adenashire.

Where cats are, one may find mice.”

Arleta raised her eyebrows and tipped her head toward the five cats standing behind Theo. “Hmm, is that so?” She gazed around at the nearest stalls.

“*This market is not infested with mice,*” Mr. Figlet squeaked. “If that is what you are insinuating.”

“You’re the one who said it.” Theo leaned in and whispered, “I might have seen one over there.” He pointed to the honey seller’s booth.

Mr. Figlet threw his paws up and scoffed. “Fine, fine . . . hand out your little coupons today. Be speedy about it, and don’t let me catch you all here again.” He turned to leave.

“What if we rent a booth next time?” Arleta called with a wry smirk. “Can we hand them out then?”

The quokkan threw his hands out into the air. Not looking back, he stormed off down a different row of booths.

“Well,” Arleta said, “I guess we showed him.”

Theo chuckled and thumbed through the coupons again. “Let’s finish this up and get back to the shop. I need to make sure the cats didn’t make a mess of the place before we open again.”

With Theo’s mood improved, they spent the next hour chatting with potential customers, and he even ate a few samples to tide him over. He’d almost lost track of the time. When they’d given out all the coupons, they made their way back to the shop.

Somehow the others had beaten them back.

Their friends had moved several of the tables and chairs outside, and customers actually sat sipping steamy drinks and eating pastries. In fact, a pair of gnomes stood leaning against the building to enjoy their purchases since there weren’t *enough* places to sit.

Eyes bright, Doli and Taenya gave them a wave in unison.

“What happened?” Arleta pulled them aside while Sarson exited the building with a tray of coffee cups and several danish.

Theo’s eyes traveled back to the window where six cats sat gazing at the commotion outside.

“When we got back, there was a line,” Taenya said.

“Just in case, we didn’t want the cats to scare anyone off. Not that I think they’re scary at all,” Doli added, looking at Theo. “There’s just so many.”

“Then Jez had the idea we should just move some seating outside,” Taenya said.

Theo moved his attention back to the shop. “Where is Jez?”

“In the bakery.” Taenya motioned with her head to the *A Little Dash of Magic Bakeshop* sign. “We’ve had so many customers, we’re going to run out of pastries soon. So she ran in to make a quick batch of cookies.”

Doli wrinkled her nose. “Plus she was sneezing too much going in and out of the shop. Clearly baking was a better choice.”

“Excuse me!” A human man wearing a bright green cotton shirt called to Taenya and held his hand in the air. “We’re still waiting for our order.”

Taenya beamed, her elf ears shifting upward. “Let me go and check on that for you, sir.”

The man bobbed his head politely and returned to chatting with the curly-haired woman seated next to him.

“I guess we should go in and help,” Arleta said and threaded her arm through the crook of Theo’s elbow.

Several people walked toward the shop with coupons in hand. Doli stayed out to greet them while Theo and Arleta rushed inside. Sarson stood behind the counter making orders while two cats flanked him on top of the counter . . . supervising, of course.

Theo checked for Taenya, but she must have gone next door for the extra baked goods. Instead he found at least three cats lounging on the floor, four more on the couch and chairs, and the six—no, seven—at the window, since there was now a kitten he hadn’t seen from outside. More cats hung out in the storage room where the rows of cat dishes and water waited. The rest had to be next door with Faylin.

“The sheer amount of cat hair is a bit of a challenge,” Sarson said, waving away a tuft of floating fur without looking up from pouring cream into two coffee cups. Then he reached under the counter to pull out two lemon pastries and slid them forward beside the drinks. “Ready for the human in the green shirt and the lady next to him. But those are our last pastries.”

The passway door opened and Taenya walked through with a tray of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies with sea salt sprinkled on the top.

“Always a favorite,” Taenya announced as she set down the cookie tray.

Still hungry and recognizing Arleta’s cookie recipe from the Baking Battle, Theo grabbed one and took a bite. He closed his eyes as the warm,

buttery cookie melted in his mouth. “These never get old,” he groaned.

Arleta chuckled, and avoiding the long-haired tortie sprawled out on the counter, she grabbed a tray and loaded the order on top. “So glad you like them, but there’s more work to be done around here.” She leaned over and gave Theo a quick peck on the lips, then made her way outside to the waiting customers.

He followed her with his gaze and noticed a faun child kneeling outside the window, running their finger over the glass. It was likely the same faun who’d noticed the cats on the street after they’d first shown up. A brown and cream colorpoint jumped up on her back legs and batted at the motion while the child laughed. An idea started to form in Theo’s mind, but Doli rushed in with several more orders scrawled on slips of paper.

“Two more,” the dwarf said and thrust the papers onto the counter.

“Yes, ma’am,” Sarson said and immediately got to work on it.

Theo grabbed another cookie, stuffed it in his mouth and made his way outside to talk to the customers.

Several hours later, Theo, Arleta, Doli, Sarson, Taenya and Jez had closed the shop but left one of the tables outside to rest at.

Each of them nursed steaming cups of either coffee or tea, and Jez had held back a plate of treats for them.

The fennex picked up a snickerdoodle and popped the entire thing into her mouth. After she chewed and swallowed, she said, “I think that went well.”

“If it’s going to be that crowded every day, we need a schedule,” Doli said, leaning on Sarson’s muscled arm. “Since we all have other jobs.”

The blue gargoyle’s eyes were mostly shut, and he looked like he was about to doze off any second after all the drinks he’d made that day.

“Plus,” Taenya added, “it would be nice to keep the seating mostly indoors. So what do we want to do with all the cats?”

Theo leaned back in his seat and wrapped his arm around Arleta. After taking a sip of his tea, he eyed the cats whose noses were still pressing up against the glass as they peered outside. He couldn’t forget how much the little faun child had enjoyed playing with them—and vice versa with the cats.

He twisted his lips before speaking his idea into the realm. “What if we turned the *Stay and Sip a While* into a *cat* café?”

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“**W**hat’s a cat café?” Jez mumbled, resting her cheek on one hand and looking as if she were about to doze off.

Taenya gave her girlfriend a quick poke and the fennex perked up.

Eyes wide, the rest of the group stared at Theo as if they had the same question. Trouble was, even Theo didn’t know what he was talking about. All he knew was that he’d seen the little child stare longingly at the cat through the café window. Pair that with the fact that Verdreth and Ervash had brought two cats into their home and seemed to enjoy their company, and the idea seemed viable somehow.

“A café . . . that has cats in it?” Theo said, shrugging and forcing a happy expression.

Arleta looked around and behind her, where several pairs of cats’ eyes glowed slightly, reflecting the street lights. “Well, this is a café. And we *definitely* have cats.”

Doli leaned her elbows on the tabletop and squinted at Theo. “What if everyone came to have a drink and pastry . . .” She paused for a second. “Play with cats while they’re here . . . then if they want to, take one or two home with them.”

“That *would* take care of the problem,” Sarson said, his wings fluttering slightly behind him. “Especially since more keep showing up.” He raised

questioning eyebrows to Theo.

The wood elf balled his hands loosely under the table, but as soon as he did, Arleta's finger glided over one of them.

"It's a good idea," she whispered.

He gave her a grateful look. "I'm not sure when they might stop coming. Ibus did say the potion should wear off eventually. But for now we have to do *something*."

"Then a cat café it is," Doli said and rummaged around in one of her deep skirt pockets. "Oh, there we go."

Theo had no idea what the dwarf was talking about until she pulled out a small leather-bound notebook and a pencil and held them up. "Next order of business, we're going to need a new name since *Sip and Stay a While* doesn't quite fit. Something that involves cats."

After the long, exhausting day, Theo's brain was pretty fuzzy. "I hadn't even thought of that. But you're right."

Doli adjusted herself on the seat and brought her feet up under her, making the dwarf look almost as tall as Arleta. Eyes bright, she looked as if she'd gotten the second wind Theo wished he had.

"If we're going to do that, then we're going to need more cookies." Taenya pushed away from the table and took the empty plate. "I'll be back."

An entire meal would have been nice, but Theo wouldn't have the energy to cook anything once he got home and he knew it. Really, he just wanted to fall into bed and sleep for hours. He was about to call to Taenya to bring out any chocolate chip that were left, but a voice interrupted him.

"Theodmon," Shalina said.

Theo's chest tightened at her voice. He turned to see his mother only a few steps away. She looked tired. The sky was mostly dark, but under the lamplight he made out the purple hollows under her eyes. The wood elf's blonde hair was pulled back into an uncharacteristically simple ponytail, while she wore a plain shift dress made of silk instead of a fancy ensemble.

Theo had hoped she'd left Adenashire while they all worked at the shop that day. But there she was.

Theo's hands balled under the table. He wanted to forbid her right then and there to ever speak poorly about Arleta again. But he knew it wasn't the time or place. "Mother?" he answered simply.

Shalina flicked her attention to the others, including Arleta, but her gaze didn't linger there for long.

“You two should go talk.” Arleta stood and gathered her and Theo’s empty mugs. “I’m getting a refill inside.” She placed her hand on Theo’s shoulder and squeezed, then turned and walked toward the café door.

“Sure, we’ll work on a list of names while you’re gone,” Doli added.

Theo rose and nodded. “Thank you for your help,” he told Doli and Sarson. He would have said the same to Jez, but she was asleep with her arms and head on the table.

“Always,” Doli said and gave him a warm smile.

Chest already starting to burn, Theo stalked up to his mother and gestured for her to walk with him.

The two didn’t speak until Theo spotted *The Tricky Goat*.

“Are you hungry?” Theo asked, loose street pebbles pushing like boulders into his boot soles.

“Yes,” Shalina said in a breathy tone.

Not sure what to expect when they actually talked, Theo turned off the road to lead her along the pathway to the entrance. “Don’t you say anything about this place,” Theo warned quietly as he opened the door. The winking goat carved into it seemed to mock him as he waved his mother in first.

Shalina gave him a quick nod.

He led her through the foyer and into the pub, which thankfully wasn’t as busy as usual. Theo wasn’t in the mood for any raucous displays. He spotted the darkest booth available in the corner and made a beeline for it.

Shalina slid gracefully but gingerly onto the bench across from Theo and turned her attention to the bar, where bottles of alcohol lined the shelves. Sure enough, the pink-skinned ogre Theo had seen at the market was working as the bartender that night. At the moment he was cleaning the bar top with a rag.

Theo seriously considered ordering a shot of something but decided against it. He wanted to remain as clearheaded as possible. “The food options are over there.” Theo pointed to the menu board near the entrance.

That night they’d choose between shepherd’s pie, roasted chicken with greens, and pork stew with caramelized vegetables.

“The chicken sounds good,” Shalina mumbled after a moment, but she didn’t sound as if she really wanted any of them.

Their server, a petite woman with bouncy red curls, delivered two glasses of water and a basket of flaky biscuits with a side of honey butter. “Give me a holler when you’re ready to order.”

“We’re ready now,” Theo managed and gave her their order, since he’d already decided on the shepherd’s pie.

“Those are great choices. It’ll be right out.” The redhead nearly skipped back to the kitchen.

After stuffing his mouth with half a biscuit, he finally asked. “Why are you here, Mother?”

Shalina rubbed her neck as she poked at the biscuit in front of her. “I told you. I was disappointed—”

“In me?” Theo quickly poked the rest of the biscuit into his mouth, not quite believing what he’d said.

“What?” A look of horror raised Shalina’s pale brows. She gulped.

“You’re disappointed in me, Mother,” he got out. “You’ve been disappointed for a long time.”

The elf blinked at Theo several times before saying, “I’m not disappointed in you.”

“Then why do you act like it?” Theo asked, working to keep his voice down. “Why do you fight me every step of the way? You’ve always hated every choice I’ve ever made. I wasn’t like you, and you hated it. You hated me moving out to the cottage in Langheim.” He paused. “Is it because I look like my father?” Theo truly couldn’t fathom what he was saying. The idea had crossed his thoughts many times. As he’d aged, he had noticed the resemblance. He’d tried to cast the notion aside, but it bore a weight on him that he didn’t want to admit. Sometimes he couldn’t help but see the elf who had left him and his mother at the worst time in their lives.

“Your father?” Shalina’s blue eyes flicked back and forth as if Theo had instantly become more difficult to look at. “Why would you ask that?”

“Here’s your chicken.” The server was already back and sliding Shalina’s meal to her. “Now that plate is hot.” She beamed while Shalina pursed her lips. “And the shepherd’s pie.”

The browned mashed potatoes sprinkled with melted white cheddar topping the pie would have looked delicious to Theo any other time, and at the café he’d been famished. But now his stomach churned at the sight of it.

“Anything else you need?” the chirpy server asked and plunked her hands on her generous hips.

Theo managed a quick smile at her. “I don’t think so, but this looks delicious. Thank you.” He rummaged in his mind for her name, as she’d

been working at *The Goat* for a few weeks and had served him and Arleta before. “It’s Kay, right?”

The server’s eyes crinkled. “Yes. Yes it is. Now you all enjoy your meal.” Kay bobbed her head and turned away, then greeted another set of guests with just as much enthusiasm.

Theo poked his pie with his fork, working up the courage to take a bite.

“You’re not like your father,” Shalina whispered, fiddling with her napkin.

Theo’s eyes shot up to meet hers.

“You’re too kind,” she said and shook her head. “Not that your father was unkind . . . but he was also weak. When Kellam got sick, he refused to believe his son could actually die. He searched the Northern Lands high and low for a cure.”

“Any father would do that,” Theo said, keeping his voice down. He didn’t think he’d heard his mother say Kellam’s name in decades.

Shalina closed her eyes briefly as if recalling a specific, painful memory. “Of course. But toward the end . . . he used it as an excuse. Kellam needed him. You needed him.” Moisture threatened the corners of Shalina’s eyes, but as always she repressed the tears that threatened to make her look fragile.

“You needed Father too,” Theo added, his heart and chest constricting.

Were he and Shalina getting somewhere?

“You boys *really* needed him.”

Biting his lip and hoping he didn’t regret his next move, Theo reached across the table and touched his fingertips to hers. “You needed him too. And he wasn’t there.”

“I’m really not sure how it happened,” she whispered, surprising Theo by not pulling away. “He was different when we first met.” Shalina gulped. “I was different too.”

Shalina *was* different before Kellam fell sick, and Theo could hardly believe she was admitting it. He’d been young, but some memories of their life together still remained. Theo shared magic with both of his parents. His father communicated with animals, while Shalina manipulated the growth and health of plants. Since Kellam had died, his mother had rarely used her magic. Instead she’d thrown herself into managing and judging the Baking Battle—not that baking had even been a passion of hers. But the job had

required near constant attention, and Theo was starting to understand why she'd needed the distraction. He didn't excuse it . . . but he understood.

"I needed you too, Mother," Theo got out.

She wrinkled her nose, still trying to hold back the tears. "I didn't leave you, Theo, not like *he* did."

"No," Theo said. "But you weren't there. Worse, you pushed me away."

A thick-furred castor family walked in chortling, and Theo's attention immediately moved to the parents and two kits. As his eyes traveled back to Shalina, she swiped her hand over her left eye.

"Then you left Langheim," Shalina said.

Theo placed both his hands on the tabletop and looked his mother straight in the eye. "Father hurt you. And you pushed me away when Kellam died. Our entire family died with him. Until you accept that . . . we can't move on. We can't heal."

"What is it you want me to do, Theo?" Shalina's voice was tinged with sudden defensiveness. At that moment the thread of hope Theo wanted to cling to was the idea that she was a scared mom who'd lost nearly everything years before.

Grief clings. Grief endures. Grief sometimes makes us into the monsters we fear most. The painful thought tumbled in Theo's mind.

Shalina became quiet and slid her hand from Theo's and onto her lap.

"I want you to own it, Mother," he said, his voice firm. "Then I want you to apologize to Arleta. We can't ever move on until you do both." Theo's tone softened. "You have an opportunity to do better. Start over with a grandchild on the way. You have family right here." Theo drew his hand to his chest, pouring out what he needed from her.

But instead of speaking, Shalina only sat there as if frozen.

They stayed that way for a long time. Too long.

Theo felt gutted. Was his mother truly unable to admit what had happened between the two of them? He'd had been a child . . . so it definitely wasn't his fault. Though he hadn't eaten a bite of his dinner yet, Theo almost stood to leave. But he didn't get that far.

"Is there anything you need?" Kay was back at the table, sporting that cheery expression of hers.

Theo dropped back into his seat. "Can I take this with me?" He pointed to his uneaten meal and did his best to keep his voice steady. "She might need a box too since I think we're not staying."

“Oh? Sure,” Kay said, her voice peppered with confusion. “I’ll get them.” She turned and walked off to a new table of eight customers. It was going to be awhile.

His mother still sat silent.

After a fleeting glance at Shalina, Theo stood and walked to the bar to pay for both meals. When he returned, the food was already boxed up, likely by the second server he’d just passed. He grabbed his and focused his intense gaze on Shalina.

“For this to work, you need to accept your mistakes, Mother,” Theo said. “I love you and I always will, but you can’t be a part of my life if you can’t accept Arleta. It’s all or nothing.”

“Theo—” Shalina tried to stop him with her words, but he was already halfway across the worn wood floor, his chest tingling and free hand balled into a fist. As fast as he could, he made it through the front door and out to the street. He let out the breath he’d been holding and picked up his pace. He wanted nothing more than to be home with Arleta immediately. If she was even there yet.

“Oh, hey, wait!” Faylin’s voice came from behind him.

“Where’d you come from?” Theo gripped the meal box and eyed the lynx pattering at his side, trying to keep up.

“Arleta thought it was a good idea if I followed you,” Faylin said. “You know, you *could* slow down.”

“I don’t want to slow down,” Theo insisted as his chest heaved for air.

Faylin bounded in front of the elf, blocking his path. “I can see that. Do it anyway.”

Since he apparently had no other choice, Theo halted and stared at the lynx. “Fine. But I don’t want to talk right now.”

“I can accept that.” The lynx raised his nose and sniffed the air, then licked his lips.

Theo narrowed his eyes into slits. “And you’re *not* getting my dinner.”



The time it took to get home seemed like an age to Theo even though the walk to the cottage wasn't that far. Warm lights came from the window, and Arleta's silhouette passed by the glass from inside.

Upon seeing her, it felt like the air was sucked from his lungs. Part of him wanted to run inside and go to her, but the other part didn't want to admit to her what had happened with his mother.

"It's okay to be confused," Faylin said, breaking into Theo's negative thoughts.

"Is it?" Pressure built in his chest, and he nearly blurted out that his father had probably been confused, and look at where it had gotten him. Look at what his choices had done to their family.

"We can't always know the future, Theo," Faylin said. "All we can do is travel the road of life with the people we love and trust, and hope we make it to the end of the journey with as few regrets as possible."

Theo bit his lip. After a moment he reached out and stroked Faylin's head. The action stopped the chatter in his mind. "You still can't have my dinner."

The lynx chuckled. "I wasn't asking for it. Now go to her. She can handle your feelings."

Not hesitating, since he didn't want to change his mind, Theo hurried past the rosebushes lining the front and opened the green door.

"Oh, you're here!" Arleta barely had the words out when Theo tossed his leftovers onto the kitchen table and threw his arms around her. "I wasn't expecting you so s—"

"I'm so scared, Arleta," he admitted, cutting her off. Tears were already halfway down his face.

She didn't ask what had happened with his mother. She just held onto him tighter and allowed his words to bubble out.

“I’m so scared to be a parent,” Theo admitted. “I’ve wanted to share this with you for so long, and now it terrifies me. What if I don’t know what to do? What if I can’t handle it, like my father couldn’t?”

Arleta gently pulled back from his embrace and looked him in the face. “Are you afraid you might leave?”

“What if I did?” Theo cried. “What if everything gets too difficult and I let you down?” His eyes traveled down to Arleta’s middle, and he grazed his hand over the place where their baby grew. “What if I let our *child* down?”

“That’s not going to happen.” Arleta placed her hand on top of Theo’s. “And *I’m* terrified too, you know.”

“What?” Theo’s attention snapped back to her face. “You’ve been so happy.”

A light chuckle left Arleta’s lips as a tear coursed down her cheek. “Of course I’m happy. *You* are too—and we’re both terrified. Too many nights I have dreams about my parents’ accident, and I worry about something like that happening to us. What if we left our baby behind?” She paused and gulped. “Theo, you’re the one who taught me that some things are worth the risk. We’d miss out on so much life if we didn’t take them.”

Theo took and squeezed her hand, not quite sure what to say.

“You’re going to be an amazing father, Theo,” Arleta said. “There’s nothing else you *could* be.”

After wiping his face, Theo whispered, “Thank you.” He still didn’t know if he believed it, but he really wanted to.

Arleta gave him a soft grin. “They’re moving.” She drew Theo’s hand back to her bump.

Gentle fluttering tickled his palm, and Theo could only describe the sensation as pure joy. “Is that what it feels like?”

“Mm-hmm,” Arleta said and stretched up on her toes. She bit her lip and then kissed Theo. At first the kiss was soft, gentle, but it quickly deepened as his hands snaked around her soft waist. A moment later she pulled back, a wry grin stretching her lips. “Let’s go to bed.”

His head light, Theo was more than happy to oblige. It wasn’t long before he’d locked the bedroom door behind them, not even caring that Faylin was probably in the kitchen enjoying every last bite of his shepherd’s pie.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



“Patches has really enjoyed these since I installed a similar set in our cottage last week,” Ervash said as he nailed a long wooden plank high on the wall of the café. He had carefully sanded and stained the wood to perfection.

Theo knew everything there was to know about the shelves because the orc had enthusiastically explained it no fewer than three times that morning. Ervash had also described the system he’d devised so all the cats could easily work their way up to the long run of shelving to gaze down at the customers drinking hot beverages. The shelving would extend around three-quarters of the place.

He didn’t mind listening to the orc, however, since it was a good distraction from his mother’s continued presence in town, though he hadn’t actually seen her since their argument at *The Goat*. He felt sure she would walk through the front door of the café at any moment.

“Are you doing okay with the stairs?” Ervash called to Verdreth, who was affixing smaller planks starting near the floor and leading upwards in a diagonal.

While everyone worked on the place, Theo and Arleta had managed to deck out the storage room so it was comfortable enough for all the cats. Theo hadn’t counted them for a while since he didn’t really want to know how many there were. For their entertainment, Doli had sewn a horde of

cloth mousies for the cats to play with, as well as more beds and pillows. And Jez, despite being allergic, had made several fishing pole toys complete with wall mounts so the cats could bat at the tiny felted fish hanging from the ends.

The fennex had been quite pleased with herself.

The front door flung open and Sarson came inside, his arms filled with books. “I brought everything else I have,” the gargoyle announced as he plopped the books down in front of Theo.

“Thanks.” Theo already had his nose buried in a book titled *The Best Plants for Your Cat*. Of course, Theo already knew a lot about plants, but he wanted to make sure all the ones he had in the café were safe in case any cats decided to take a nibble.

There would be no tragedies involving cats when he was around.

Beside him sat a list of notes, and he planned to write up sheets of information later to send with anyone who wanted to take a cat home.

Sarson pulled out the chair next to Theo and slowly lowered himself onto it. Sensitive as he was, the giant, blue-skinned gargoyle was always careful not to damage furniture built for those smaller than himself.

“My granny had a cat when I was little,” Sarson mused, flipping through a book called *Keeping Your Cat Healthy in the Northern Lands*. “Little wisp of a thing.” He chuckled. “Although that’s not saying much since Granny was as big as I am.”

“What kind of cat was it?” Theo looked up from his book, suddenly picturing a gray-haired gargoyle that looked like Sarson in spectacles and a dress.

The gargoyle held out his massive hands and moved them in and out as if trying to recall how big the cat had been. Finally he waved dismissively at the air. “Oh, I’m not sure since I was pretty young . . . all I know is that she was fluffy and white.” Sarson pressed on his nose and let out a chortle. “Kind of a flat face and couldn’t keep herself clean. But Granny didn’t mind. She loved that little cat.”

Theo turned to the closed storage room at the back of the café and tried to picture the cats inside. “I don’t think any of the ones here look like that way.”

“She was one of a kind.” Sarson chuckled.

“I’m sure,” Theo agreed and drew his attention to the books on the table that Sarson had brought. *Games to Play with Cats, Majestic Felines of the*

Realm, Magic Cats Love, House Panthers Under Your Bed, and several others. “You’re sure we can keep these at the café?” Theo asked, running his finger over the array of book titles as he decided which one to read first.

“Yep. No problem. I have some fiction featuring cats too,” Sarson said, picking up *Majestic Felines of the Realm* from the top of the pile and flipping through the pages. “Those might work well here too.”

Theo placed his book down. “I didn’t want to ask too much, but yes, that would be great too. I’d really like it if people came here to read and learn as much about cats as possible. I figure the cats will like it and so will the customers. Verdreth has several on order for me right now to help fill the bookshelf.”

The mentioned bookshelf sat right next to the counter so customers would be able to grab a book, order a drink and then settle in on the couch or a chair with a cat or two.

To him, the experience sounded enchanting. If he didn’t have so much more on his mind.

“I think it’s a great idea,” Sarson said and closed the book. “Having places to relax always helps calm people’s minds from the business of life.”

Theo couldn’t have agreed more. “I really do hope people like it.”

Of course, there was always the chance they wouldn’t. Most inhabitants of the Northern Lands saw cats only as sentinels to keep the mice out of their barns and grain, not as pampered pets to lounge around like little kings and queens. Yes, the little faun had liked the cats through the window. But would their parents actually take one home? Starting the cat café was a risk for sure . . . and one that might affect the bakery business negatively.

A trickle of magic rose over his fingers as he tapped them on the wooden tabletop.

“Look at these!” Taenya’s voice called out with excitement, and Theo looked toward the passway. The elf approached with a tray full of frosted and intricately decorated cat-shaped cookies.

The confections were all different colors and several shapes. One had a cat holding out her paw to bat a ball. There was also a sleeping cat and a seated cat looking forward.

“I just love this one.” Taenya plucked a striped ginger cat cookie, complete with a blue collar and a little matching flower expertly piped next to its ear.

“They were all Jez’s idea,” Arleta said as she followed Taenya into the room with a second tray of cookies.

As if she’d heard her name the fennex popped her head in, a rare smile on her lips. “I’m still working on decorating the rest.” She quickly hurried out, probably to avoid sneezing.

Theo stood up to get a better look at the cookies and couldn’t believe the detail in each. Well, he *could* believe it since Arleta, Taenya and Jez were all amazing bakers . . . but the cookies looked so lifelike.

“They’re really amazing,” Theo said, wavering his attention between both trays, unable to decide which design he liked best.

“Try one.” Arleta held out a cookie with a black and white cat sporting a red bow tie. “They’re lemon with vanilla bean.”

The choice of lemon wasn’t a surprise since Arleta’s current fixation had moved on from lime to a few other citrus flavors.

Theo took the cookie from his Fated while Taenya delivered more to the orcs and Sarson. He held it up and studied the little smiling cat face with a pink nose and delicate painted whiskers.

“Aren’t you going to take a bite?” Arleta asked.

Theo eyed her. “I feel a little guilty. He’s so cute.”

Arleta slid the tray onto the table next to the stack of books and playfully chose a brown tabby cookie that was just as adorable as the one Theo held. She held it up for a moment, then bit off the head.

“You’re a brute,” Theo said with a chuckle.

She arched her right brow, chewed, then swallowed the first bite. “I know.” Then she bit off the tail. “Delicious.” Her hazel eyes danced with mischief while her dark lashes fluttered.

“How could you?” Theo eyed his own cookie, mouth watering, but he held back to keep the game going a little longer.

Twisting her hips, Arleta bit her lip. “There’s so much you don’t know about me yet.”

Unable to help himself Theo broke into a hearty laugh. “I’m sure that’s true, but I’m in this for the long haul.” He waggled his eyebrows. “I’ll learn aaaaaall your secrets.” Finally he took a bite of the cat-shaped cookie, and deliciousness flooded over his taste buds. The tart lemon in the icing paired with delicate vanilla was perfect. “That’s amazing.”

Arleta gave Theo’s shoulder a quick nudge. “Of course it is, silly.” Finishing the rest of her cookie, she gazed around the room. “When you’re

all done with the work in here, Tae and I will make a little display with the cookies on the counter. Too much dust right now.” Arleta’s eyes crinkled at the corners, and she kissed him on the cheek.

“It’s here!” Doli called excitedly as she stood at the open front door. At some point Faylin had peeled himself off the chair and was now standing by the dwarf, pawing at the floor and making air biscuits. Theo had rarely seen the lynx show his enthusiasm so openly.

When no one could decide what to name the cat café, Theo had delegated the task to Doli and Faylin. It had been a bit of a risk, of course, but of all of them Doli did have the best taste and Faylin was . . . well, a feline.

Over the last several days both of them had been incredibly tight-lipped about the name and said that everyone would learn it only when the sign arrived. Even Ervash, who normally would have carved one for them, didn’t know since he’d been too busy making cat furniture for the café.

Outside a gnome was parking a pony-drawn cart with what must have been the sign, covered with burlap, sticking out of the back.

Doli waved to Sarson, who was enjoying a cookie. “Can you retrieve it?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Wasting no time, the gargoyle stuffed the remainder of the treat into his mouth and hurried out. He easily lifted the still-covered sign and brought it inside.

“Thank you!” Doli called and waved to the gnome driver before he pulled back onto the road.

“What’s the name?” Verdreth asked, his eyes bright and hands clasped in anticipation.

In truth, the café name was such a small thing after all the work they’d done, but Theo couldn’t wait to find out either. Anxious, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and Arleta slipped her arm around his waist to steady him.

Sarson reached to pull off the burlap, but Doli held out her hand.

“Wait,” she said. “Faylin and I have a few things to say.”

Jez groaned from the passway where she leaned against the door frame, a half-eaten cat cookie in her clawed hand.

Taenya walked over and took Jez’s other hand. “You’ll survive this difficulty, my dear.” The joke was uttered as if spoken in all sincerity.

Jez rolled her eyes at Taenya and slipped her arm around the elf’s waist. Doli giggled and cleared her throat as if she was making an incredibly serious announcement.

“Okay,” the dwarf said. “Is everyone ready now?”

Several cats cried from behind the storage room door.

“They are,” Ervash said, pointing in their direction.

Theo was eager to let the cats out. They’d been extremely patient the last few days, but he was well aware that it wouldn’t last much longer. “I’m ready too,” he called.

“Faylin and I spent a long time going back and forth about the perfect name for the cat café.” Doli eyed the lynx, who was seated but still making air biscuits. “After hours of deliberation, we finally settled on the perfect one.”

“Purrfect,” Jez joked. She was apparently in a good mood.

Taenya snickered.

“Yes—” Doli started again.

“Then we had to describe the look we wanted to the sign maker,” Faylin interrupted. “It was all extremely exhausting. I missed out on multiple naps for you, Theo.”

Grinning, Theo bowed his head slightly. “I’m forever grateful for your dedication.”

“Well,” Faylin said, holding his head high and flicking his tail. “I couldn’t have *my* elf running any establishment with a less-than-ideal name.”

“Understandable.” Theo knew Faylin was just as excited about the place as everyone else because when he’d been awake, he wouldn’t stop talking about it. “Now can we see the sign?”

“Oh, why not?” Doli conceded and gestured to Faylin.

The lynx stood up, grasped a loose section of burlap with his teeth, and tugged the fabric onto the floor.

Revealed was an intricately carved and brightly painted cat sitting, legs crossed like a person and a steaming hot beverage in his paw. To his side were the scroll words, *Kettles and Cats*.

Everyone in the room stood silently staring at Theo for his reaction as he walked toward it and bent down. He ran his fingers over the crevices carved into the wood as he read the words again.

“*Kettles and Cats*,” Theo whispered.

The café’s name wasn’t really *that* important in the big scheme of things. But it was important in Theo’s heart. Often he could hardly believe the blessings brought into his life when he’d delivered Arleta’s Baking Battle

invitation. Not only had he found his Fated after years of searching, but he'd also found a whole chosen family of people who *got* him . . . who loved him and made his life that much better.

He couldn't ask for more.

The love and thought that were poured into both the name and the sign made it extremely important.

He reached over and wrapped his arms around Faylin's neck. "I love it so much."

For a beat Faylin stiffened. In all his days, he'd never been a hugger. Then the lynx relaxed and said, "You're welcome."

Not wanting to overstay the allowed embrace, Theo drew back and said to everyone behind him, "I love it!"

Caught up in the moment, all his friends cheered and clapped.

Theo stood to give Doli a hug. "It's really amazing, but I expected nothing less from you."

The dwarf gave Theo a tight squeeze in return. "Nothing but the best for my friends." Then she drew back and addressed everyone. "Now let's get these cats some homes!"

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN



The new sign hung proudly outside, the cookies were neatly displayed on the counter, feline-themed books filled the bookcase and cats roamed the café, playing, sleeping and sunning in the morning rays streaming through the window. Ervash had painted several cat portraits that now hung around the room.

Verdrehthad even picked up a potion from *Spells and Sortilege* that blocked the cats from entering the bakery through the passway. Only a few drops had been necessary.

Everything was perfect.

Except for one thing. There were no customers.

Kettles and Cats had been open for its first day for two hours and not one person had ventured inside. One older lady wearing an enormous blue floral bonnet had stopped in the bakery and bought two dozen chocolate chip cookies. She had poked her head into the café and declared, “Interesting.” That was as far as it went.

“Perhaps we need to distribute some coupons at the market again,” Sarson suggested as he leaned his elbow on the counter and ran one hand along the spine of a spotted brown cat. The gargoyle scratched at the base of the cat’s tail, and she raised her rear high.

“What would it read this time?” Theo asked from the couch near the window, a little defeated since they’d all worked so hard to make the café a

great place to hang out. “Buy a tea . . . get a cat?”

Faylin lay draped over his lap, sound asleep and snoring lightly.

“Maybe.” Sarson shrugged. “Or take a kitten with your coffee.”

Theo snorted.

Arleta poked her head through the passway and gazed from one end of the café to the other. “No one?”

“No one,” Theo and Sarson said in unison.

“Well,” Arleta said, “we have a bit of a lull on the bakery side, so I’ll have a drink.” She studied the menu board above the counter. “How about the Lavender Vanilla Purrfection?”

Theo had come up with several cat-themed specialty drinks to replace the old names.

“Coming right up, ma’am,” Sarson said with a grin and immediately got to work making the hot milk and herb concoction.

“Can you make it two?” Theo called and placed his hand on his bouncing knee that somehow had not disturbed Faylin. He figured the relaxation properties of the lavender-spiked drink couldn’t hurt his nerves since he couldn’t afford for more cats to show up. They were running out of room.

A lanky black cat with a white patch under his nose, making him look as if he had a handlebar mustache, crawled from the other side of the couch, then stretched and plopped down directly against Theo’s leg.

Theo reached down and stroked the cat’s head and velvety ears, trying not to think about the café failing and all the cats there living at his cottage instead. The cat let out languid purrs.

A few minutes later Arleta brought their drinks over to the couch and sat next to Theo. The scent of cinnamon, vanilla and sugar wafted from her hair and made Theo’s heart flutter.

“Here you are, my love,” she said and handed him the mug. She dropped her gaze to the cat wedged against Theo’s leg. “And who’s this handsome guy?”

Theo took a quick sip of his lavender-scented tea and scratched the cat’s chin. “I haven’t given him a name yet.”

“It’s Nine,” Faylin mumbled under his breath, not opening his eyes. “And what if she was talking about me?”

“Arleta knows your na—” Theo paused. “Wait, are they talking to you and you didn’t tell me?” Theo asked, surprised, but then he remembered the lynx had named one cat William when the cats first arrived. He scanned

around the room for William and found the colorpoint perched on the counter a few steps from Sarson . . . and dangerously close to knocking a lemon pastry onto the floor.

“Just their names,” Faylin murmured.

Theo scrunched his brow in frustration. “So they *can* communicate?”

“I told you . . . it’s just names. Plus they only just started.” Faylin stood, pressing his paws into Theo’s legs, then slid to the floor.

The lynx gazed around the room. “That’s Trubel, Rocket and Ocean. Over there is Mamas, Goose and Tinker.” He turned to where several cats were scattering before the ponderous walk-hop of a three-legged brown tabby. “Atticus, who thinks he owns this place and has gotten a bit bossy for my taste.” Faylin scoffed.

Annoyingly, they *could* talk . . . and Theo still wasn’t sure why they refused to talk to *him*.

“Well.” Arleta took another sip of her drink. “I like Nine very much.”

The cat rolled over onto his back, exposing his belly and the hidden white patch there.

“Good thing, since we might be taking him home,” Theo said. “Plus everyone else living here if the place goes out of business.” The lack of customers was turning Theo’s mood slightly sour. Instead of entertaining customers, he’d mostly been cleaning up hairballs.

“Star, BJ.” Faylin was still naming off cats.

Arleta patted Nine on his belly and gave him a little tickle. “Oh, our family is growing anyway. Why not add a few more mouths?”

Before Theo could respond, a tailless kitten skittered across the wooden floor chasing a bright green felted mousie. When she caught the toy, she flipped over on her back and kicked it, causing the mouse to fly through the air and land on the back of a fluffy gray cat.

Theo turned to his Fated, who was obviously holding back a laugh.

Faylin continued naming cats. Theo did his best to ignore the recitation since it felt like the lynx was goading him.

Arleta brought her mug to her lips, then said, “I’m *sure* Doli and Sarson would take five or six of them.”

“What?” Sarson called from the counter, his wings puffing out slightly and nearly hitting the stack of mugs behind him.

Doli and Sarson were *still* discussing taking home the one striped cat she’d all but named Shadow. He was over at a giant cat tree with multiple

levels for the cats to lounge on, giving it a good scratch.

Arleta broke into rolling laughter and stood with her tea in hand. "This is all extremely entertaining, but I need to get back to the bakery since Tae will want a break soon too." She turned and ran her fingers through Theo's hair. "We're going to make this work."

Not able to get up since Nine had crawled onto his lap and fallen asleep, Theo stayed put and let out a long sigh. He wanted to have the same optimism, but the empty café wasn't helping.

When Arleta got to the counter, she placed her empty mug on top of it. "That was delicious, Sarson. And you don't need to take six cats."

The gargoyle shook his head as she left and a white cat butted him on the arm, then flopped her body onto the counter in front of him, asking for a belly rub.

"Only four," Arleta called before she was out of the room.

Sarson groaned.

Sudden giggling came from the street, and Theo craned his neck to see what was going on. The same faun child he had seen playing with the cats outside the window days before was pulling their mother toward the café.

Hope burst inside Theo's chest. *Are they coming?* He carefully picked up Nine and placed the still-sleeping cat gently to his side as they approached.

"We're just going to have a snack," the neatly dressed faun woman said as she pulled open the café door.

They were coming in! Before he could stop himself, Theo leaped to his feet. The mustached cat woke, pulled back in horror and jumped from the couch to find a new lounging spot.

"Welcome to *Kettles and Cats!*" Theo blurted a little too loudly and swept his hand a bit awkwardly through the air. "What can we get you?"

The elf knew beyond a doubt that he sounded and looked ridiculous. At that point there was little to do about it except continue. The faun woman had long curls hanging over her shoulders, reminding Theo of flowing caramel ribbons.

"Perhaps a Hot Chocolate with Caramel Purr-izle?" The suggestion came out too eagerly and he suddenly felt silly from the pun.

The child pulled their mother's hand toward the kittens play-fighting near the counter over a purple felted mousie. "Can I see them, Mother?" they asked in a high-pitched voice filled with desperation.

Exasperated, the elder faun let out a sigh and released her child. “Make sure you’re gentle,” she instructed.

Light seemed to burst in the little faun’s brown eyes, and they plunked their delicate hand onto their hip. “Of course.” They gazed around at the cats scattered around the café. “They’re all little babies, and you *have* to be careful with babies.” With that they scurried on hoofed feet toward the kittens and slid down to the floor next to them.

The mother gazed up at Theo. “Napea hasn’t stopped talking about the cats since the other day when they were playing with her through the window. I must have heard about the spotted one, the white one, and the black one at least a thousand times.”

“That’s Cami, Frankie, and Krissy,” Faylin called from the too-small cat bed he’d slunk into.

Theo continued to ignore him. “In that case,” he said to the mother faun, “then I’m certainly glad you stopped in.” He smiled. “I’m not sure we’ve met before. I’m Theo.” He gestured to the open passway. “My partner is Arleta Starstone, who owns the bakery next door.”

“I’m Zialo,” the faun said, bowing her head slightly. “Oh, we’ve been to *A Little Dash of Magic* many times. Everything they make is absolutely delicious. Not sure I could go a week without stopping in.” She patted her stomach. “Arleta and Taenia are the best at what they do.”

The accolade filled Theo’s chest with pride. “Well, Zialo, I can’t argue with you there.” He led the faun to the counter while Napea yanked one of Jez’s fishing poles up and down, the kittens leaping into the air to catch the toy fish.

“Sarson will be making your drinks today and getting anything else you need.” Theo tipped his chin to the gargoyle, who wore an oversized tan apron.

“What can I get you, ma’am?” Sarson asked enthusiastically.

Zialo’s eyes traveled over the options on the menu board over Sarson’s head. “I think a small hot chocolate would be good for Napea, and add in the caramel—what was it, Caramel Purr-izle for her? And if you don’t mind, can you tell me more about the Cinnakitten Latte?”

A grin crossed Theo’s lips at the sound of the drink names coming from a customer’s mouth. Maybe they didn’t sound *that* silly. And if they did . . . he really liked them anyway.

“Oh, that’s a good one.” Sarson grabbed a mug from behind the counter and drizzled caramel syrup all around the inside of it. In a second cup he placed a creamy piece of chocolate, poured hot milk over it, and let it set. “It uses coffee sourced from the north. There’s a farmer up there I found when I moved from the Ridgelands to Adenashire. He has this amazing roasting process that removes any bitterness from the beans.” After Sarson had stirred the chocolate into the milk, he poured in a bit of cold milk to take away some heat for the small faun, exactly the way he and Theo had decided it should be made for junior customers—or anyone else who requested their drinks less piping-hot. “Then we grate in some white chocolate, add steamed milk, and top with a sprinkle of cinnamon sugar.”

Zialo’s eyes danced as Sarson described the drink and finished making the hot chocolate. “That sounds incredible. I’ve had coffee but never anything like that.”

Before the café had opened as the *Sip and Stay a While*, Theo and all his friends had spent hours on end developing the unique beverage combinations. During that time all of them drank a tremendous amount of coffee, tea and hot chocolate. Most of the drinks had just been renamed to things like Salted Caramel Cold Purrew and Black Cat Coffee to go with the cat café theme.

“It really is delicious,” Theo confirmed.

“Then that’s what I’ll have,” Zialo said, looking visibly more relaxed than when she and Napea had entered.

Sarson pushed the finished hot chocolate across the counter to the faun. “Coming up.”

“Oh, and I’ll take two of the cat cookies.” She leaned in closer to Theo and eyed her child, who now sat with Nine the mustache cat purring on her lap. “She won’t let me get out of here without buying at least two.” There was a sparkle in her eyes, though.

Theo reached for the cookies. “Any preferences?”

“How about a black and white, then . . .” She studied the selection. “And an orange cat with the ball.”

Theo selected the most highly decorated of the bunch, placed them on a plate and handed it to the faun. “The cookies are on the house.”

“Are you sure?” Zialo pulled back slightly and presented two coins pulled from her pocket. “I can pay.”

Theo shook his head, his heart warmed just by having the fauns stop in. “Of course, but think of them as a gift. You’re our first customers.”

“You’re very kind.” Zialo handed the coins to Sarson for the drinks and took the chocolate from the counter. “We’ll be sure to recommend the place to our friends.”

“Thank you,” Theo said, almost believing again that the café might be a success. “I’ll bring you the Cinnakitten as soon as it’s ready.”

Zialo bobbed her head and made her way to the same spot on the couch Theo had been sitting on earlier. Immediately she sank into the cushions, and from Theo’s vantage point it seemed like whatever had weighed her down before coming into the café had vanished.

He wanted nothing more for his customers.

“That went well,” Sarson whispered as he leaned across the counter closer to Theo.

“It did,” Theo said. “Now if we can get twenty more people in like that.”

When the coffee drink was ready, Theo delivered it to Zialo, who now had a large fluffy brown tabby with an enormous tail curled peacefully on her lap and her child leaning against her shoulder.

“I named him Charlie,” Napea said as she lazily stroked the cat’s side.

Theo flicked his gaze to Faylin for confirmation about the name, but he was sound asleep on the floor.

Zialo took the coffee and sipped it. Her eyes lit up. “That’s as delicious as you all described. I can almost taste the sunshine of the coffee farm.”

Theo’s brows raised. “I’m glad you like it.”

With her free hand she waved Theo to come closer.

Not sure what she wanted, he did as she asked.

“What are the odds I make it out of here without this cat?” Her gaze dropped to Charlie, enjoying his belly rub from Napea.

An hour later, the fauns did indeed leave with the cat. He simply followed them out as if he belonged to them.

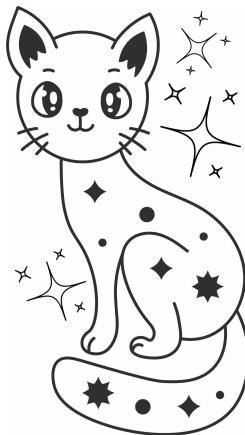
As they left, Doli and Verdreth, with Checkers on the orc’s shoulder, led three customers into *Kettles and Cats*.

“We’ve been talking you up at the bookshop,” Verdreth announced to Theo. “Checkers is a very good ambassador.”

And indeed she must have been since two more cats found homes that day.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



The day at the café had gone amazing, and the aroma of roasted garlic and herbs filled the cottage.

In his bedroom Theo breathed in the delectable scent as he checked himself in the mirror, staring for a long time.

With one fingertip he traced the curve of his ear up to the point. He turned to the side and caught the angle of his nose. The blond hair with a slight wave to it, the shade of blue in his irises, the curvature of his light brow. He had grown to look exactly like his father. Not that he'd seen the wayward elf in years, since he'd left when Theo was only a child. He'd retained some memories and had seen images since then . . . a painting here and there . . . a rumpled pencil drawing buried in the back of a drawer in the too-large house he'd grown up in . . . the one where his mother still lived.

His mother. Theo winced at the thought of her, likely still in town since Verdreth hadn't told him differently.

Theo scoffed, angry at himself that he was still mentally stuck. Everything should have been so good—cats had found new homes, the café was attracting customers . . . he and Arleta had finally shared their fears about parenthood.

Sadly, nothing had been resolved at the meeting with Shalina at *The Goat*. The memory he'd been trying to push to the back of his brain set his teeth on edge.

And staring at himself in the mirror didn't make the situation better. How did his resemblance to his father make Shalina feel? How might he feel if the roles were reversed?

That brought Theo to the idea that his child may resemble his father too. He shifted his weight at the thought.

"You aren't Father," Theo reminded himself. He knew that, and Arleta had reminded him of the same thing. He was absolutely certain that Arleta's past didn't have to repeat itself, but when it came to his own, he couldn't shake the doubt. Particularly when he was reminded of it every time he looked in the mirror.

Eager to rid himself of the negative thoughts and enjoy the time he was about to spend with friends, his gaze traveled around the room. He needed grounding. First he studied the simple bed he shared with Arleta, with a green blanket covering it and two pillows at the head. It was a safe place. Arleta's hairbrush lay on the dresser in front of him. Theo picked it up and ran his thumb over the rough bristles while his mind eased into a memory of her sitting on the edge of the bed in night clothes and running the brush through her long, chestnut hair.

Theo's breath hitched and his eyes snapped open. He hadn't even realized he'd closed them. Carefully he replaced the brush and turned on his heel toward the savory scent of whatever delicacy Arleta was preparing in the kitchen.

He emerged from the bedroom, his hair freshly combed, clothes changed and ready for a relaxing evening. Other thoughts were not going to discourage him—the day at the café had been tiring but incredibly satisfying. The success was something to celebrate, and that was exactly what he planned to do.

Of course, most of the new customers had only been curious. As Theo knew well, small cats were mostly known for living in barns . . . not in cafés, and certainly not homes in Adenashire. Even so, the patrons had seemed to enjoy the experience of drinking coffee and eating pastries with a cat or two on their laps or playing with a group of feisty kittens. Plus they were loving the menu of Catpuccinos, Meowchas, and Hibiscuit Kit-Tea.

Best of all, a total of three cats had gone home with their new people. That in itself was an accomplishment when just the week prior, the clowder had almost scared off *anyone* from coming inside.

Thinking of Faylin, Theo knew better. Cats added to the joy in life. And coming home after a long day and having a cat curl up next to him had always given him solace in even the worst times.

Perhaps his café would change how people in Adenashire saw cats . . . and maybe in the entire Northern Lands someday.

It was a big goal. There was no denying it.

“How about you go out and keep Doli and Sarson company?” Arleta slipped her hand over Theo’s back. “Instead of creeping around in here.”

He’d been standing in the living room lost in his thoughts.

A warm shiver prickled his skin as he came out of the place in his mind. “Trying to get rid of me?” he joked.

Arleta twisted her lips before saying, “Yes. Yes, I am. Tae and Jez should be here soon, and I have a few more preparations for the party that I’m not ready for you to see yet.”

“Oh, well,” he teased. “If *that’s* how you feel.”

Arleta shook her head and wrinkled her cute nose.

Theo’s eyes dropped to her lips. Her full lips.

“You really didn’t need to go to so much trouble.” Studying his Fated, all Theo could think about was taking her in his arms and kissing her. The skin exposed on her décolleté looked like silk, and his fingers itched to run themselves over it. His eyes traveled over the necklace she always wore. Party be damned.

A grin traveled over Arleta’s mouth. “I see where your mind is heading, Theo.” She gave him a little push, her cheeks flushed. “Now go out back and be a good host. I have work to do.”

He leaned in and gave her a soft kiss, lingering a little too long before breaking it and walking out the back door. When it shut, he let out a long deliberate breath, then stopped and admired the view, trying to banish his remaining concerns if only for a while.

The evening was perfect with a slight cool breeze playing off the garden, swirling the fresh bright scent of herbs into the air. Overhead, stars flickered in the sky.

Relaxed by the sight, Theo sighed, gathering his thoughts.

The first day of running *Kettles and Cats* had been long, so he was grateful for Arleta’s suggestion of sharing a meal with friends, with everyone instructed to bring a dish so no one had to do too much work.

He hadn’t expected such a big deal made about it.

Sarson and Doli were across the yard at the wooden table, which was decorated with one of Arleta's prized possessions—her mother's lace tablecloth. Atop that was a sunflower arrangement from *Floral Fantasies*. Arleta had lit several small candles and scattered them around the tabletop, and fairy lights twinkled from where they hung over the table, casting a magical glow.

It was more than a simple get-together. She was obviously proud of him. Theo made his way out to his friends.

“How many more customers came to the cafe after we left?” Doli asked as she placed a spoon into a dish of cheesy potatoes she and Sarson must have brought.

Her nearly black hair was arranged in a style of intricate braids leading to the top of her head, where they wrapped around a perfect bun. She wore a fancy pink satin dress with bows on the sleeves. Not that Doli *ever* missed an opportunity to dress up. Sarson was in the same clothes he'd worked in that day, sans the apron.

Theo rolled his eyes at the silly question. “Didn’t Sarson already tell you?”

The dwarf giggled and looked over at the gargoyle, who sat with his head resting on his hand as if he might doze off any second. “Multiple times, but I want to hear it again.”

“Ten,” Sarson mumbled and reached up to rub at the back of Doli’s neck. “Ten more customers came in from your recommendations at the bookshop.”

She pulled her chin back as if it were the first time she’d heard the information. “Ten!” Doli exclaimed, her tone bursting with mirth. “So many!”

“And that was *after* you and Verdreth left,” Theo added, deciding to play along. He slid onto the bench across the table from his friends, feeling brighter already. “Don’t forget the three you personally brought in. One of them took a spotted cat home.”

Doli giggled with delight again. She looked over at Sarson. “See? All those people are loving their new cats. I think Shadow would make a great addition for us.”

Before Sarson could respond, Ervash came from his yard holding a platter with a large, golden roasted turkey. “The main event has arrived!” he boomed.

Both Doli and Sarson applauded in Ervash's direction.

"Finally," Sarson said, though he didn't even eat meat.

Theo chuckled, not sure whether Ervash was announcing the turkey or himself.

After holding his contribution high for everyone to see, the orc placed the platter next to the floral centerpiece. He admired his offering for a shake before he held up his finger and announced, "Oh yes, the gravy." He turned and bounded back to his side of the yard.

"You think you could grab me one of those drumsticks?" came Faylin's voice from below, the lynx suddenly at Theo's side licking his lips.

Without waiting for a reply, he stood up on his hind legs and swiped his paw, claws out, at the turkey. Theo blocked him at the last moment with his hip.

"You can have my portion," Sarson joked from the other end of the table.

"Gladly." Faylin swiped at the turkey again, his tail flicking with excitement.

Theo scoffed at the lynx and pushed the turkey just out of reach. "Can you wait for once?" he barely got out before Arleta announced, "Dinner is served."

Knowing he shouldn't take his eyes from Faylin, Theo twisted his neck to his Fated walking from the back door. She was carrying an overflowing basket of bread rolls looped over her arm and clutching a heaping platter of roasted vegetables with gooey browned cheese sprinkled on the top. The dish must have been the source of the garlic and herbs Theo had smelled earlier, and he couldn't wait to partake in it. Despite her own long day working at the bakery, Arleta was radiant with the fairy lights reflecting off her hair. Theo's stomach buzzed with the same sensation of flutterbees as when he first met her.

Taenya and Jez followed and set several other dishes on the table, which Theo barely noticed since he was still looking at Arleta.

"Where are my dads?" Arleta looked around and over toward the orcs' cottage, still holding the bread and vegetables.

His near-trance broken, Theo moved to help his Fated and took the platter from her hands. "I'll get this."

"You don't have to," she said, smiling. "This is your celebration."

"And I thank you for that." Theo kissed her cheek and set the platter in an open spot at the end of the table, right next to the fudgy chocolate sheet

cake either Jez or Taenya had placed there.

Seconds later, both orcs came into their yard, Checkers and Patches prancing behind them, and Verdreth announced, “The gravy has arrived.”

From across the table, where Jez had found her seat next to Taenya, she groaned and said, “We’re saved.”

Taenya snickered but lightly smacked Jez on the arm. “Be nice.”

The orcs chuckled at the fennex and took their seats while their two cats stalked Faylin, who had hunkered down just out of the light.

Apparently the lynx had successfully ripped off a drumstick during the gravy proclamation since one turkey leg was missing. Shaking his head in amusement, Theo grabbed his glass of sparkling juice in solidarity with Arleta and held it up high.

When everyone noticed, all chatter at the table stopped.

“I know we’re here to celebrate the opening of the café, but I don’t think any of you can know how grateful I am for all of you,” Theo announced.

“We have a pretty good idea,” Jez shouted, a sly grin pulling at her lips. “And don’t forget the cat cookies were my idea.”

The fennex seemed feisty that night. She also had already cut and plated a piece of the glazed chocolate cake and had a bite in her mouth.

Theo pointed the cup in Jez’s direction. “Maybe you all do. From what I’ve observed, we all pretty much feel the same about each other.”

It was true. Each of them had the other’s backs for problems big and small, and the entire group enthusiastically celebrated all of life’s joys.

“Hear, hear!” Jez raised her glass and slipped her arm around Taenya.

Theo’s eyes lowered to the spot next to his on the bench where Arleta sat. He placed his free hand on her shoulder, and magic vibrated under his skin.

“Each and every one of you has brought unique richness into my life that I had never imagined,” Theo said. “I don’t think Arleta would mind me speaking for her and saying that we both are so grateful that *you* are the people our child will grow up knowing and loving.”

At his words Verdreth took off his glasses and sobbed. Ervash pulled the orc in close while Doli whipped out a hanky from somewhere inside her dress and held it out.

“Thanks,” Verdreth blubbered as he took it and dabbed at the corners of his eyes.

Theo raised his drink a little higher. “To the people we love and who love us back . . . and to *Kettles and Cats*.”

Everyone returned the toast, and a blink later even Jez was quietly asking for a hanky. She said it was for her allergies, but Theo was pretty sure it was for something else.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



The next morning, a halfling couple sat enjoying drinks in the café while several cats lounged on the floor. A few others perched up high on the shelves Ervash had made.

Five other customers had already been in, and they'd only been open for half an hour. Word was getting around town despite Mr. Figlet's mouse infestation rumor. It seemed that most people hadn't believed it—particularly after the faun family had talked the café up.

Theo worked in the back filling the cats' bowls with food and cleaning up their space while Sarson attended to anyone who came in.

Several cats prowled as he prepared their breakfast. One stood sandwiched between the elf's legs while two others circled around him, yowling in unison.

"Here you go," Theo announced as he placed the food on the floor and patted the cinnamon-colored cat with a long fluffy tail who, if he were not a cat, might have a chance at working as a singer. Theo chuckled at his own thought. "What was your name again, sir?" he asked, hoping the cat might talk to him. Faylin had told Theo the cat's name, but after the busy opening day he'd forgotten.

The cinnamon cat stared at him blankly with golden eyes, then lowered his head to the food bowl and munched alongside the others.

Figuring he could ask Faylin later, Theo turned to the open door and nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Mother,” he said, his eyes widening.

Just behind her stood Sarson, looking sheepish. He shrugged with hands out as if to say, *sorry, I tried to stop this.*

But Theo didn’t blame him. The gargoyle had already done a lot by volunteering at the café, *and* he was well aware of the force his mother could be.

Several cats scurried out of the storage room and past Theo’s mother into the café.

Shalina stood there, beaming and holding a giant bouquet of flowers. Theo’s eyes dropped immediately to the maroon lilies in the middle of the bunch. Just days before, he’d read that lilies were highly toxic to cats. He opened his mouth to tell her so, but she thrust the bouquet into his hands.

“These are for Arleta,” Shalina blurted out, her tone sounding a little too forced to Theo.

He eyed the passway between the bakery and café. “You know she’s right over there. You could deliver them yourself.”

Shalina glanced over her shoulder and brought her attention back to Theo. “I thought I’d give them to you.”

A tiny growl reverberated in his throat, but he quickly squashed the emotions bubbling to the surface. What if his mother really was there to apologize? He wanted to give her the chance to do it, clumsy as it might be.

Something slipped across his calf, and he raised the flowers to see what it was. The cinnamon-colored cat licked his lips and rubbed his body on Theo’s pant leg while purring loudly.

Tension brewed in Theo’s stomach, and he couldn’t help but think that if Shalina didn’t go home soon, he was going to end up with a hundred cats in his café. Still holding the flowers, Theo made his way past his mother and over to Sarson, who was behind the counter again. “These can’t be in here with the cats,” he said as quietly as he could manage. “Can you do something with them for a while?”

“Sure,” Sarson said and took the bouquet.

“What do you mean they can’t be in here?” Confusion wavered in Shalina’s tone. “I got them at a flower shop in town.”

Theo cringed, then turned to her. “If cats eat one of those lilies, they will die,” he announced bluntly, and every head in the room turned his way.

Including those on a few of the aforementioned cats.

“Oh.” Shalina’s brows arched. “I didn’t know.”

“Yes, Mother.” Theo lowered his voice even though he didn’t really feel like it anymore. “I get that.” Something tickled his feet again. The cinnamon cat had followed Theo and brought a few of his friends, *all* of whom were purring as loudly as a small swarm of locusts. Carefully Theo shuffled away from the cats while his mother followed.

“I only wanted to apologize,” Shalina said. “And I want to be a part of your child’s life.” She paused. “I was even thinking I might stay until the baby is born . . . and possibly for a while after.”

“What?” The high-pitched question came from the passway, and Theo whipped around to see Arleta standing there, her mouth wide open in horror. She slapped her hand to her mouth as if the word had escaped without her permission.

Shalina straightened her back and addressed Arleta. “Yes. I thought it would be a good time for us to get to know each other better, and I could help you prepare for the baby.”

Arleta flicked her alarmed gaze to Theo, mouth still agape under her hand. She looked stunned, as if her feet had rooted into the wooden floor.

As cats continued assembling around Theo, his mind raced. The halfling couple were staring, coffee mugs suspended halfway to their mouths. This couldn’t really be happening. “What are you talking about, Mother?”

“I thought it might be nice.” Shalina blinked several times. “I’ve kind of been enjoying this little town of yours.”

Theo’s heart pounded in his chest and ears. Making sure he didn’t step on any of his cat entourage, who were now singing as if they’d all joined a choir, he made directly for his mother and took her elbow gently but firmly. “We need to speak about this in private.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Shalina said.

Theo threw a quick glance at his Fated and mouthed *I’ll fix this*. She nodded once, but the look in her eyes was still one of alarm.

“*Private*, Mother,” Theo insisted as he ushered her to the door, all while scanning the floor for darting cats. “I should have taken care of this days ago.”

“Well, I guess we can go back to my apartment above the bookshop if you want some privacy,” she offered.

On the way he passed Faylin batting gently at a ginger kitten, one of the first who'd shown up. The little guy had arched his back and was leaping from side to side in mock ferocity.

As he reached the door, Theo felt Faylin's gaze. Luckily no café cats had escaped to follow him. At the rate his heart was beating, though, he wouldn't rule out more cats appearing out of nowhere while they walked.

"I have no idea why you're getting so upset, Theo," Shalina said as he hurried her to *It's About Tome*.

Of course you know why I'm so upset, Theo thought, but he kept his mouth shut for fear of saying something he'd regret right in front of everyone in the street, including a wrinkly woman in a sunny yellow dress who couldn't take her eyes off them.

After fending off a barrage of questions for what seemed like two ages, Theo had his mother inside the bookshop.

"Oh, Theo," Verdreth said when they entered, his eyes lit with surprise. "And Shalina. Everything alright?"

Theo forced a smile but he wasn't fooling anyone, let alone Verdreth. "We're going upstairs."

"Okay." The well-dressed orc took a book from the shelf next to him and opened it. "I'll be here."

Despite the act, Theo sensed his gaze all the way up the stairs.

"I'm not sure why all this is necessary," Shalina said as she unlocked the door. "We could have sat down at your little café."

Theo still said nothing until they were inside with the door closed behind them.

The room was dim, with only one window.

"Are you really doing this again?" Theo balled his fists at his sides.

Shalina shook her head and walked to the living area to sit in a chair. "I *really* don't know what you're talking about."

Theo's temples throbbed like they were going to explode. "Are you going to pretend like nothing happened with Arleta and expect everyone around you to just move on, like always?"

"I'm not saying nothing happened." Shalina waved her hand through the air. "That's why I brought the flowers to apologize. To tell you that I'd like to be a part of your and . . . your partner's lives."

Theo deadpanned. "Arleta. *My Fated* is Arleta." He walked to the kitchen counter, where his mother had a bowl filled with fruit she'd likely picked up

at the market. He couldn't actually picture her going down there by herself and shopping. Servants like Devdan, her assistant, took care of that sort of thing back in Langheim. "And she's having our child soon."

"Yes, Theo. Your Fated is Arleta." Shalina's tone was frustrated. "Again, the coming baby is why I offered to stay and help."

Sure that Shalina was baiting him, Theo turned away and slid both hands over the countertop. He needed a breath . . . or five . . . or a hundred.

He couldn't go on like this, but he stood there for a long time. Longer than he wanted to.

"I honestly don't know what the problem is," Shalina stated. "I'm just a future grandmother wanting to spend time with her grandchild."

If only that were true, Theo thought and gritted his teeth.

Though he took several measured breaths, he was convinced several new cats would walk out the open doorway from what was still occasionally Doli's room. By the luggage on the floor by the bed, his mother had been sleeping in there.

Theo turned back to his mother and eyed the way she was seated—back straight, hands on her lap. He was sure she couldn't wait to leave Adenashire but was making excuses to stay. He did everything in his power to keep his voice steady. "If you really wanted to apologize, you wouldn't have shown up at the café in such a public way. Or brought the flowers to me like you were trying to get me on your side. You would have sat down with both of us, Mother, and you most definitely would not have tried to butt your way into staying until the baby came, and then some stars-forsaken open-ended timeline."

Shalina opened her mouth to speak.

"Please allow me to finish," Theo said, pushing from the counter and making his way toward the fireplace where she was seated.

Her lips were pinched as if she was holding something back. Without a doubt, Theo knew there were words on her tongue fighting to get out. There always were. But Shalina kept her mouth closed.

Theo sat in the chair opposite her and gripped the arms till his knuckles whitened. "Growing up . . . after Kellam died and Father left . . ."

Her eyes widened at the mention of Theo's father.

"You weren't there mentally or physically," Theo said. "The only mothers I had were the in-and-out nannies you'd quickly tire of then replace."

"Theodmon—" Shalina started but Theo shut her down with his eyes.

“I’ve thought a lot about this, and I understand the pain you had because I had it too,” Theo said. “We both lost everything, and it wasn’t fair. But in so many ways, I’ve moved on. I’ve finally found the life I want.”

“Without me,” Shalina whispered.

Theo gulped. Gathering the courage he needed to face her. “Yes. Without you.” The words shot pain through his limbs, making him want to flee, but he had to say them. “I’m grown now. And it’s not my responsibility to ignore the past or make amends just because we’re family. If you want a relationship with me and mine, it’s up to *you* to do that.”

“Yes—” she started.

“And you know perfectly well that does *not* entail showing up here in Adenashire unannounced,” Theo cut her off. “Insulting Arleta and then demanding to stay here in Adenashire for months on end when you haven’t been invited.” Frustrated, Theo raked his hands through his hair.

But the pause gave Shalina a chance to get her thoughts in.

“I wasn’t demanding,” she managed.

Theo’s hands formed like claws, and he blurted something out that felt good and awful all wrapped up in an extremely messy package. “You have to act like a mother first!” His eyes burned as he stared at her. “You have to do better.”

In obvious shock, Shalina snapped her hand to her chest. “I don’t know what to say, Theo.”

“Say you’re willing to do better,” Theo demanded.

“I’m *trying* to do better.” Shalina raised her voice and shifted in her seat. “And I need some help here.”

Theo scoffed as an array of choice words danced on his tongue. “I understand you’re hurting, Mother, but it’s not my responsibility to heal that part of you. That’s something you have to figure out. I’m working on my own healing. If you’d like to be a part of my *and* Arleta’s life, you are welcome, but only if you’re willing to confront the past. I can’t do it for you, and I will not ignore your behavior.” Theo straightened his shirt. “I love you,” he admitted, voice cracking. “But you are not allowed to harm my family if you can’t bother to work on changing yourself. You need to go home.”

At that point Theo turned and walked to the door. His mother was saying something but he was unable to stay to hear it, since he required the most air he’d ever needed in his entire life.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN



Head spinning, Theo pounded down the staircase leading from the apartment to the bookshop sales floor. Tears burned at his eyes, but he was too angry to let them fall. He stopped at the bottom of the banister to catch his breath.

Thoughts tumbled through his mind. Would he ever have a normal relationship with his mother? Was the elf even capable of such a thing?

The swirling in his middle paired with how difficult it was to catch a breath told him no. That in order to have a happy life, to protect his family and heart, he would have to completely let her go.

Despite that, part of him still wanted to believe that *no one* was completely beyond hope.

Having caught his breath, Theo moved toward the exit, determined to escape the shop.

“Hey,” Verdreth said from the shelf where he was arranging books. Checkers skidded across the floor to Theo.

The elf had to jump to avoid the little black and white kitten. He cursed and ran his hands over his face to calm himself again. “I can’t do this,” he said under his breath.

“Not that I was listening . . . but that didn’t sound good up there,” Verdreth said, keeping his voice down and eyeing the top of the stairs.

Theo stood staring at the orc, wanting nothing more than to leave, but before he could, Checkers made a flying leap for his pants and used them like a ladder to climb his leg. “Ouch!” Theo pried the kitten from the fabric and brought him up to eye height. “You know that’s rude?”

Checkers stared at him blankly and mewed while her back legs dangled in the air. She mewed again and he brought the kitten to his chest, right at the spot over his heart.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell her, but she doesn’t seem to listen,” Verdreth said, walking closer to Theo. “Even Ervash has to wear a shirt more often to keep her claws out of his skin.” He leaned in a little closer. “Not that I mind seeing him in a nice, pressed shirt occasionally.”

At that moment, Theo didn’t really care about Ervash’s shirt, or lack of one. Listening for the apartment door, he let out a long sigh and cradled Checkers in the crook of his arm. “They are a little like needles.”

“Right?” Verdreth’s dark brows raised with the question, but then his expression turned into an awkward crooked smile.

The two of them rarely talked alone.

Almost mindlessly Theo stroked the kitten’s head, and she seemed to melt in his arms. As she started purring loudly, his nerves settled. A bit.

Verdreth lumbered to the door, locked it and turned over the sign in the window to *closed*.

I was just about to leave, Theo thought, but the words didn’t make it out of his mouth before the orc clapped a giant hand on Theo’s shoulder.

“Let’s have a little tea,” Verdreth said. “Arleta was just here, and I was going to take a break anyway since the pot is ready in the back. Some company might be nice.”

“Arleta was here?” Theo snapped from wherever in the realm his head had gone.

Verdreth nodded. “She wanted to find you, and I told her I’d make sure you were okay once you came back down. I need to make good on the promise.”

Okay? Theo was most definitely *not* okay. Particularly after learning Arleta had been there and might have heard some of the argument with his mother. His mind raced, but drawn back to the purring kitten in his arms, he allowed Verdreth to lead him into his office and close the door.

“Have a seat.” Verdreth motioned Theo to the worn, overstuffed, orc-sized chair that took up a good amount of space in the already tight office.

Obediently, and still holding Checkers close, Theo plopped into the chair and gazed around the room. Verdreth poured tea from an orange pot into two mugs he'd retrieved from a shelf.

"I don't have any cream or sugar." The orc held out one mug to Theo in an offering.

"That's fine," Theo said as he took the steaming cup. He did prefer it sweet and creamy, but black was fine in a pinch. Checkers perked up her ears and her black nose twitched. She stood up on her little hind legs and sniffed the tea, whiskers vibrating slightly. When the kitten was done inspecting the hot drink, Theo took a sip.

Both bitter and slightly sweet, the cherry-infused tea was a lovely blend. But he'd enjoy it more if he weren't in such a sour mood.

Stacks of bookshop receipts sat piled high on the oversized desk, and the orc lowered himself slowly into the chair behind it. He leaned back to drink his own tea, blowing on it first. To his right was a built-in bookcase, mostly filled with books but also half-melted candles and some knickknacks, like a carved wooden bear sitting next to a drawing of Verdreth and Ervash.

Theo couldn't remember if he'd ever actually been inside the office even though he'd been in the bookshop plenty of times.

Verdreth reached over and took the framed drawing from the shelf and set it on his desk in front of him, angled in such a way that Theo still saw part of it.

The two orcs looked at least twenty years younger. There was no gray starting to show at their temples, and both of their green faces were smoother. Looking at the differences between the past and present, Theo imagined how he and Arleta might look in the future. When they were older and grayer. Honestly, he looked forward to seeing the lines that would form around her eyes and mouth. Passing time would only make his Fated that much better to him because they'd spend their lives together.

"When I first met Ervash, I couldn't stand him," Verdreth mused, blowing on his tea again. "Did you know that?"

"What?" Theo asked, snapped from his vision of future Arleta. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Verdreth chuckled and pushed his spectacles up from where they'd slipped to the bottom of his wide nose. "It's true." He leaned back in his leather chair and gazed upward as if exploring a memory. "Ervash was *not* my type at all."

Theo raised a skeptical brow. “And what type is that?”

The orc raised a brow right back at him and said nothing, sipping his tea.

“But you get along just fine these days,” Theo said. Looking down, he noticed that Checkers had curled up on his lap like a cinnamon roll, so he had no idea when he’d be able to get up again. He mindlessly ran his fingers over her black, silky tail as she purred.

Verdreth took a big gulp from his mug and poured another serving from the pot. “I think you know that all kinds of relationships are complicated. None of us travels a straight path to get where we’re going.”

As Theo petted Checkers and listened to Verdreth speak, his nerves calmed slightly, and he nearly forgot his mother was upstairs. Nearly.

“But we’re here now,” Verdreth said, running his large thumb over the image. “Ervash and I have been together for many years, we have a daughter in Arleta—”

“Don’t forget me,” Theo teased.

“How could I ever forget about you, elf?” he said. “Even better, a grandchild to spoil on the way.”

“I’m not sure you liked *me* much from the start either.” Theo called Verdreth out, remembering the first time he’d met the orcs when he delivered Arleta’s Baking Battle invitation. Come to find out, Ervash had secretly entered Arleta into the contest . . . but when Theo was the one sent to accompany her there, they’d been less than thrilled. At least that’s how it had seemed to him, looking back on it.

Verdreth chuckled. “You’d be right.”

Theo made a stabbing motion to his heart in jest.

“No one was good enough for our Arleta.” Verdreth ran his finger over the glass covering the drawing and then flicked his attention to Theo. “We both saw the light in your eyes before Arleta did.”

“Really?” Theo asked, taking a sip of his tea.

Verdreth squinted at the elf and set down his cup. “You’re not terribly smooth, Theo.”

Theo let out a quick chuckle and scratched at Checkers’ cheek behind her white whiskers. This truth wasn’t lost on him. Theo had never fit in, and it shouldn’t have been a surprise that his Fated was human instead of an elf.

“I think we’ve both changed our minds about you.” Verdreth grasped the picture again and returned it to its spot next to the bear figurine. “Although

we're still watching." The orc waved his finger at Theo before his lips arched in a toothy grin. "So behave."

"Oh, I know," Theo said. Checkers stood up, stretched, turned twice and then flopped back onto his lap. He still wasn't leaving anytime soon.

The two of them sat quietly for a spell until Verdreth piped up again. "Would it help to talk about whatever is going on with your mother?" He pulled out the desk drawer and rifled around inside as if giving Theo space by avoiding his gaze.

Out of mild discomfort, Theo took a drink of his tea and held the lukewarm liquid in his mouth before swallowing. "Arleta hasn't told you?"

He wasn't really aware how much Arleta shared with the orcs on a regular basis. Certainly they knew what had happened at the Battle when Shalina had tried to trick Arleta into leaving and never looking back. But what about her relationship with Theo?

The orc pushed the drawer shut and brought his attention back to Theo. "No, and we haven't asked her." Verdreth leaned forward and rested his arms on the desk. "You can talk about it or not. I just want you to know I'm here to listen."

Theo's chest tightened for a moment, then relaxed. The orc was trustworthy, and having someone other than Arleta to talk to would be nice. After a big breath he told Verdreth the entire story, starting at the beginning when Kallem had died and ending with the fight he'd had with his mother upstairs.

At the end, Verdreth leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "That's a lot, son."

Theo agreed. It was a lot.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Verdreth asked, finishing the last of his tea and picking up the pot, only to realize there wasn't any more left. "Could Ervash and I talk to her? We're all going to be grandparents together, after all."

Theo swallowed down the lump that had formed in his throat. He'd had so many reasons to be thankful for his friends lately, and here Verdreth was, filling the role his own father had abandoned.

"I've already said what needed to be said to her, I think." He set his tea on the edge of the desk, being careful not to dislodge the kitten. "My mother has her issues to work out, and I have mine. I'm not sure we're ever going to meet up."

Checkers finally stood, turned around and jumped down to the floor, only to immediately bat around a wadded-up receipt she'd found under the desk.

Verdrehth gave Theo a soft smile. "You'll always have my and Ervash's support."

"Thank you. I hope you know how much that means to me." Theo gazed around the office, his chest buzzing. "I should go."

The orc nodded. "I understand."

Without another word Theo stood and left the bookshop.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Before Theo went back to tell Arleta what had happened, that he'd told his mother to leave, he needed time to think. To get ahold of his emotions.

Outside the bookshop everything looked typical. The sky was clear, shops were open, and villagers went about their normal, everyday activities. It was all *too* normal for the angst in Theo's mind and chest.

He wondered if he'd even been truthful with Verdreth. That he'd said what needed to be said to his mother, and that was the end of it.

Ending it with Shalina like he did most definitely didn't have the effect he'd hoped for. Peace.

There was no peace in his whirling mind.

Why had she really come to Adenashire? No matter what she'd said, it obviously wasn't for him, and it wasn't for the coming baby. It was only about herself and her pride . . . as it had always been.

What were the chances of her changing? Slim? None?

He knew her too well.

When he'd lived back in Langheim, he had plenty of time to be alone with only Faylin or Nimbus. He'd always been able to remove himself from Shalina's drama or the pomp she surrounded herself with by merely going home. His simple existence with his plants and animals was something

she'd considered beneath her. It hadn't always been that way. At one time she'd been more in tune with her plant magic and seemed to enjoy it.

When he was a child, before everything happened, the two of them would spend hours working in their greenhouse. But it never seemed like work to Theo. Shalina had taught him all the plants' names, where they'd come from in the Northern Lands. She'd shown him how to care for them and which types had particular needs.

During the worst times in their relationship Theo would dig back, find those memories and sit with them for a while, wondering how life might have been different. The elf she'd once been seemed to have vanished.

There were times he missed that mother he'd once known. Rather than dwelling on the loss, though, he'd accepted that there was no going back.

That's why he was grateful for everyone else in his life . . . grateful he'd found Arleta and begun building a life together. Having so many friends around was a gift. He knew that.

But when a person had spent so much of their life alone, they needed a little solo time to stay in their right mind.

At least that was what he was telling himself.

Barely remembering the journey, Theo made his way back home from the bookshop and immediately rounded the cottage for the garden. The foliage almost called to him. Of course, he was well aware it was a place where he could hide nothing.

Thankfully plants never judged.

He hadn't been spending enough time out there lately. Daily gardening always calmed him, but he'd been so busy with the café opening and preparing for the baby.

The high sun cast its brightest light over the plants, and their buds had turned to the light. It was their favorite time of day—a time to bask and take in energy for storage. To recapture some semblance of normalcy, he needed to share that energy with them.

They wouldn't mind. They'd told him repeatedly that he was always welcome.

As the elf stepped onto the stone-lined garden path, he reached out to a tall amsonia. The head of purple flowers tickled like feathers in his palm, and immediately magic flowed from his fingers and trailed down the plant. He instantly relaxed. Each flower, leaf, stem, vine, and fruit of the garden worked as a collective, and it didn't take long for their presence to draw his

mind to a deeper place. Instinctively he closed his eyes and gave in to whatever the plants had to offer. He had to. It was what he needed. Tingling warmth enveloped his body as he allowed the garden to explore his emotional state.

Nearly in a trance, he continued moving along the path while his magic spidered from plant to plant. Their presence filled his mind with images as if they were dredging through the past.

The same past Theo was running from.

Was it my fault Father left? Could I have done anything to stop him? Was that why Mother always pushed me away? Could I have made life better for Kellam before he passed? The questions flooded from his mind, and his buzzing head went light.

Theo pulled his hand back from the plants as if they'd burned him. These were thoughts he'd reburied every single time they'd surfaced. Even so they still remained, never quite gone.

A sempiternal grief.

Theo's stomach roiled and he retreated from the truth of the garden.

He wasn't ready to confront the longstanding burdens.

He turned instead toward the barn, where Nimbus stood, his chest pressed against the wooden fence surrounding the pasture.

“Would you mind if we took a ride?” Theo asked the horse and rubbed his soft muzzle. Rides had become more and more rare since they had moved to Adenashire, and he needed the wind in his hair and the sense of freedom it would provide. Not to mention the lack of thought.

To at least push the painful memories back to where they belonged. He had what he needed in Adenashire.

Where shall we go? Nimbus's eyes brightened as his voice came into Theo's head.

“You choose,” Theo answered. “I just need to clear my head.” He rounded the fence opening and quickly mounted the horse, hoping Nimbus wouldn't ask too many questions. Not like the plants had. Everything about the action was incredibly familiar, and the instant he was on the horse's back, Theo relaxed and rolled his weight on his heels. Riding bareback meant he'd need to lean into Nimbus's actions instead of his own, which was a relief.

Nimbus started off slowly as he made his way through the opening. *You up for a run?* he asked.

“That would be good.” Theo gripped onto the horse as he picked up speed, and he allowed himself to connect to Nimbus’s rhythm.

It’s like the old days, Nimbus said inside Theo’s mind.

“Do you ever miss those?” Theo asked, raising his chin into the air as the two of them cantered toward an open field not too far from the cottage. It felt good to focus on Nimbus rather than himself. The warm air flowing around his body relaxed his mind like a steamy bath, and he wondered why he’d waited so long to do this. He’d been neglecting so many of the things that gave him joy.

Do you? Nimbus asked as he lengthened his stride.

“I asked first.” Theo leaned closer to Nimbus’s neck as the horse shifted into a gallop along the suddenly uneven ground.

Langheim is a beautiful place, Nimbus said. *And I enjoyed traveling the Northern Lands for the Baking Battle, but Adenashire is home.*

Theo surveyed the landscape ahead of them, the green rolling hills and trees off in the distance. Multicolored wildflowers bloomed across the field . . . wood sorrel, the happy white and yellow daisy fleabane, the bright wild azaleas. They were everywhere, and he’d barely noticed that spring had arrived. Adenashire was everything Theo could have asked for and more.

“How long has it been since we rode?”

Too long, my friend, Nimbus said. *There’s been a lot on your mind.*

“And I haven’t talked to you about any of it,” Theo lamented.

The horse tossed his mane as he galloped through the field. *Much of friendship is the willingness to be there for others when they need it. I’m always here for you.*

“And I’ve been so wrapped up in my own self that I’ve neglected both you and Faylin,” Theo admitted.

You know, we have our own lives outside of you. Nimbus whinnied, but Theo knew that it was a laugh. The horse slowed before several gigantic oaks that spread their shade over a sizable patch of grass. *I come out here all the time.*

Theo dismounted with a thump and used his hand to shade his eyes from the sun. “It’s beautiful.” Off in the distance stood a herd of wild horses grazing. “Tell me you’ve made your own friends.”

I have, Nimbus confirmed, his chest heaving, and he lowered his head to the ground to munch a bit of green grass.

Theo was glad to hear it. He walked back to Nimbus and scratched his ear while the horse pawed his hoof against the ground.

Looking out over the view for a long time, Theo began to wonder when Nimbus might start asking him questions again. “I guess we should head back.” He blew out a long breath, making his cheeks puff out like a chipmunk pocketing nuts.

Nimbus flattened his ears straight back against his head. *I’m not sure you’re ready for that.*

Uncertainty seized him. This was the same reason he’d fled from the garden. It was as if the past refused to let him go until he confronted it.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Theo said, though he knew exactly what the horse was talking about.

We’ve known each other too long for you to think you can get much past me, elf. The horse walked to the shaded area under the oaks. *I’ll wait for you to sort through your mind and heart.*

Annoyed, Theo stuffed his hands into his pockets, but deciding the shade would be nicer, he followed Nimbus and decided to spill some of his problems. Just to get the horse to let it go. “No matter what I try, or what Arleta says, I can’t get my father out of my thoughts,” Theo admitted. “What would ever make a person leave their family like that? And never speak to them again?”

Sadness? Nimbus said simply.

The questions the plants had dredged up played in his mind. Could he have done anything to change his family’s fate?

No, Nimbus said.

Theo whirled to face the horse. In general they communicated with Theo speaking out loud and Nimbus’s thoughts entering the elf’s mind. But a few times in their lives the horse had heard Theo’s thoughts . . . when he really needed to.

Nimbus stepped toward Theo and bowed his head slightly. *It wasn’t your fault, Theo. Your father didn’t leave because of anything you did.*

“How can I be sure?” Tears burned Theo’s eyes. He tried focusing on the horses in the distance, but they’d gone blurry.

Nimbus nudged Theo’s shoulder with his nose. *Because that’s not something a colt can be responsible for. Plus I was there the night he left. Your father spoke to me.*

“He what?” Theo choked back tears, shocked by what he was hearing for the first time.

Before he left, Nimbus said, your father came to the barn.

Nimbus was young then, a colt, but he’d been with their family for a few years. He was supposed to be Theo’s father’s horse. Instead he’d taken a liking to Theo. Even then the two of them shared a close and growing bond.

I was asleep and woke to find him stroking my mane, Nimbus admitted, staring into the distance as if it helped him with the memory. He didn’t say anything for a long time, but finally he looked me in the eye and asked me a question.

“What was it?” Theo asked.

Would I make sure you’d be okay? I didn’t know what he meant at first. Of course I’d make sure you were okay. Why wouldn’t I? I always made sure you were safe when we rode, Nimbus said. But he asked the question again, and I told him of course I’d keep you safe. He made me promise. After that he seemed satisfied and left. By the next morning, when he was gone, I understood. He never would have asked that if he didn’t care about you. I think in the end the sadness consumed the elf he had been.

Winds from the east picked up, rustling the oak leaves. Theo wasn’t sure what to say. Was Nimbus only telling him this to make him feel better? He’d never known the horse to lie to him. He wrapped his arms around himself.

Nimbus blew out his breath. *I never told you since a part of me hoped he’d come back . . . and then he could tell you himself. Then the years passed and the memory of that night faded. It barely seemed like it had happened. But it did.*

Somehow the story lifted a weight from Theo, and he turned to Nimbus. “Thank you for sharing it now.”

The horse bobbed his head once.

“I’ve longed for that father to come home most of my life,” Theo admitted. “Even dreamed about how it would be to see him again. But for whatever reason, he made his choice, and I have to make mine. I can’t let the past keep me from living my life the way I want. I’m not him.”

Theo finally believed what Arleta had told him, and he bent to a lone azalea growing in the shade. Magic flowed from his fingers, and he drew a pool of it into the palm of his hand. After standing again, he let the magic float off in the wind and watched till it disappeared. He remembered what

Verdreth had said to him back at the bookshop. That he and Ervash would always support him.

Theo had always wanted a dad. And now he had two.

His life was full, and he needed to experience it without holding onto what could have been.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



After a quiet ride back to the barn, Nimbus left again to go meet his friends, the wild horses they'd seen. Theo's chest warmed at the thought that his horse had fulfilling relationships too.

As he approached the cottage, Theo spotted Faylin lounging on his back in the sun just outside the back door.

"I didn't know you were here," Theo said to him. "I thought you were at the café."

"The café is exhausting." Faylin didn't even open his eyes. "How do you all do it?"

Theo furrowed his brow, unsure what his friend was talking about. "Do what?"

"Work." Faylin finally opened one eye and trained it on Theo. "Why do you all work so much when napping is a viable option?" But just as quickly as he opened it, the eye was closed again. "You're standing in my sun," he muttered.

Looking around, Theo realized he was indeed blocking the sun Faylin had been asleep in. "Sorry about that." He stepped to the side and crossed his arms over his chest. "I do have a question for you, though."

Faylin opened his blue eyes again and groaned. "Is it more pressing than my sleep?"

Theo pinched his lips before speaking. "I think it is."

The lynx gracefully righted himself, sat and turned his chin up to the sun, his eyes closed once more. “What is it, then?”

“Are you concerned about the baby coming?” Theo asked as he sat next to Faylin on the soft grass.

The lynx cracked his eyes again briefly.

“You’ve had to remind me a few times to feed you.” Theo placed his hand on Faylin’s back. His thick fur was warm, almost too hot, from the sunshine he’d been basking in.

“Yes, that.” A rumble of purrs came from Faylin’s throat as Theo stroked his fur. “Quite an inconvenience. But what’s done is done.”

Theo moved his hand to the top of Faylin’s head, grazing over his horns and ears. “Everything is going to get even more complicated when the baby arrives, and I never want you to be neglected.”

“Oh,” Faylin said, turning his complete attention onto Theo, “I’m quite sure there will be at least a handful of times I’m going to be neglected after your cub is born.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?” Theo asked.

“Not bother me?” Faylin settled down, forming a perfect loaf shape. “I wouldn’t say that. But Theo, you do understand I don’t stay with you simply because you give me a warm meal and a place to sleep.”

Theo smirked. “Why do you, then?”

“Are you going to make me say it, elf?” Faylin asked.

In a long, gentle motion, Theo swept his hand over the lynx’s back. He nodded.

A growl resonated from the lynx’s throat before he spoke. “The night you found me as a cub,” Faylin murmured, “it was dark and I was scared to be alone.”

“You told me that your mother hadn’t returned for days.” The memory unfolded in vivid detail as he continued to stroke Faylin’s fur.

On his way home, he’d heard soft whimpering coming from a bush. When he pulled back the leaves, he found a cold, scrawny lynx cub. His coat was a lighter color than it was now, where his darker spots and stripes had fully appeared with age. The baby looked terrified, eyes wide and brimming with hunger. *Help* was the only word the lynx could communicate, and Theo had to act. There was no other choice he could have made.

He and Faylin never talked about that night much.

“Certainly I can be dramatic sometimes,” Faylin admitted. “But if you hadn’t found me, I would have died. My mother wasn’t coming back.”

The lynx cub was sickly, and Theo honestly hadn’t known if he would make it through the night. But he was determined to give Faylin the best chance. He’d wrapped his small furry body in a blanket and given him some much-needed food while keeping him company next to the fire. The next morning Theo had awoken to a still cub and feared he was gone, but then Faylin opened his mouth and breathed. Later that day Theo fashioned a sling that allowed him to carry his charge everywhere and keep him warm—and most importantly, alive.

“You nursed me back to life,” Faylin admitted. “As much as I hate to say it out loud . . . you’re my family.”

Theo closed his eyes and settled his hand between the lynx’s shoulder blades. “I love you too . . . as much as I hate to admit it.”

“Touché.” Faylin paused for a moment. “You’re going to be a wonderful father, Theo.” The proclamation was as sincere as Theo had ever heard coming from his friend’s mouth.

Theo gulped. “Thank you.”

“Don’t forget that I’m patient, though—” Faylin said.

Theo nearly scoffed.

“—I figure the more people around,” Faylin continued, “the more people there are to make sure my food bowl is full.”

Eyes crinkling at the corners, Theo said, “You’re really getting soft, my friend.”

“I know.” The lynx lobbed over onto his side. “Now leave me to my sunning and don’t mention this conversation to anyone. I have a reputation to uphold.”

“I would never.” Theo gave Faylin one last pat, then stood. The lynx was already snoring.

Lighter, Theo gazed around at everything he held so dear: the garden, the table he gathered at with friends, and the life he enjoyed with Arleta. With a grin stretching his lips, he took the path around the cottage and noticed Patches sitting in the orcs’ window. She was chattering and staring out at the small flock of finchlettes jumping from branch to branch in a paperbark maple, its rust brown bark slightly peeling from the trunk. The cat was going to have a beautiful life too.

The bricks that had sat on Theo's chest for so long had finally fallen completely away. He couldn't control his mother any more than he could have controlled his father's choice to leave them. He also couldn't have controlled whether Kellam lived or died. Those things had been written in the stars, over which he had no influence.

The only actions he controlled were his own. And Theo knew himself—he was loyal and kind, and he cared about others. His actions had proved this over and over throughout his life.

Everyone whose opinion he valued thought he would be a great father. It was time he started to believe it himself.

Theo sighed. Very possibly, he was ready to have a proper conversation with his mother. No matter what outcome it led to.



Before he knew it, Theo found himself back in town and standing in front of *Spells and Sortilege*. From the window the store looked empty of customers, so he walked inside.

But upon entering, he saw it wasn't empty at all. Jez was there.

"Oh," Theo said to the fennex, who was gazing intently at one shelf with various labeled bottles. "Hello."

Jez's fluffy ears flattened slightly to her head as she turned to Theo. "This place has too many options," Jez complained. "I can't find anything."

Theo had to agree. "You can ask Ibus for help."

Jez rolled her eyes and flicked her clawed hand to the checkout desk. "The wizard is in the back or something."

Theo eyed the counter, where a bell sat next to a stack of books. "Did you ring the bell?"

A growl rumbled in the fennex's throat. "I was just hoping to get what I needed and leave. I didn't actually want to speak to anyone."

Theo's eyes darted to the shelf she'd been searching. "What are you looking for—"

"Oh," Ibus's voice came from behind the counter. "I didn't know I had customers."

Jez and Theo turned to the gray-haired wizard, who must have arrived from the back room.

"I'll come back." Jez started for the door, but Theo caught her arm.

"She was first," Theo said, encouraging Jez toward the checkout. He couldn't help remembering that Faylin had done much the same thing to him.

Jez bared her teeth at him and growled.

Theo's eyes widened in mock terror. "You were."

The fennex tugged from Theo's grasp and lumbered to the counter. "I need something for . . . allergies." She mumbled so quietly that Theo barely heard what she'd said.

"What kind of allergies?" Ibus asked in a much louder voice and immediately flipped open the same book he'd used to find Theo's potion.

After a pause Jez glanced furtively over her shoulder at Theo, who pivoted to study the wine options again. "Cat," she finally stated as if the word weighed as much as a boulder.

Why that was so hard for Jez to admit, Theo had no idea. But everyone had their hangups. He wasn't about to judge since stars knew he had them.

"Cat, eh?" Ibus ran his finger down the page. "We've had quite a few people come in about cat allergies in the last week." He lifted his head and called out, "Your café must be pretty popular, Theo. I'm going to have to head down there myself to check it out."

Theo smiled at Ibus but didn't dare say a word in case it made Jez change her mind about what she'd come in for.

After consulting the book further, Ibus turned and grabbed a bottle from a shelf behind him and handed it to Jez. "Take this every day for a week, and it should clear up your problem. Just follow the directions on the label."

Theo reached into his pocket and dug around for a few coins. "I'll get it," he said, holding them out to Ibus.

"Really, you don't have to," Jez said and rolled her eyes.

Theo shrugged and plunked the coins on the counter. "I brought the cats to town, and I want you to be able to hang out with everyone. I'm sure Taenya's coming home with cat hair on her clothes too."

Jez's nose wrinkled, confirming Theo's suspicion. "There's a spotted one I really like," she admitted. "I kind of want to pet them."

"Who doesn't?" Theo pushed the coins over to Ibus.

The wizard bagged the potion, and with a quick thanks, Jez scurried out of the shop.

While Theo waited, Ibus put the coins away and then leaned his elbow onto the counter. "You here for something new? A cough . . . sore throat?"

Theo shook his head. "No. I wanted to report in about our experiment."

"Oh?" Ibus's eyes brightened with curiosity and he straightened. "Please tell."

"I don't know why I didn't realize this sooner," Theo said. "I think I was just too caught up in myself. But normally cats are great stress relievers. The sound of their purr almost has a magical effect if a person will let it."

Ibus drew his hand to his chin in thought.

"The potion brought the cats here to calm me down," Theo said. "But I didn't realize, so I kept getting more stressed. The more stressed I became, the more cats arrived. I wasn't taking the time to sit down or take a break. I wasn't letting them do their job, so they kept trying."

"How many in total arrived?" Ibus asked.

Heat drew into Theo's neck and he wrinkled his nose. "I stopped counting. Although it's slowed down. Apparently I'm a slow learner."

A chuckle came from Ibus's mouth. "I told you to trust the process. Good things take time."

Theo allowed his eyes to travel up and down the wizard, still not convinced he'd actually *known* everything was going to work out. "Anyway, I thought I should tell you."

"I'm glad you did," Ibus said with enthusiasm. "And good luck with your café."

"Thank you." Theo left the spell shop, his mood even better, and from across the street he noticed a sign in the *Floral Fantasies* window reading "Plant Sale." Unable to help himself, he walked over to see the selection. "Just one more stop," he muttered. It had been a while since he'd dropped in.

"Hi, Theo." Bonnie strode out of the shop with a maidenhair fern in hand as the elf inspected the plants set out on the table. A few looked a little limp and sad . . . probably the reason they were discounted.

“I saw you have a sale going on.” A shy grin quirked at his lips, knowing he had enough plants already.

Bonnie joined Theo at his side, surveying the selection with him. “They’re *all* cat-safe,” she said and found a place for the fern among the rest.

“Really?” Theo took another look at them, and sure enough, there were spider plants, blooming purple violets, the string of hearts—which always looked a little magical due to their namesake leaves—plus several others he recognized from the book at the cafe.

“I even have some fresh catnip growing in the back,” Bonnie said and picked up a hearty spider plant. “People have been asking all week about plants that are okay for their new cats. Thanks to you, my business is booming.” She placed the spider plant in Theo’s hands.

Green and gold magic sparkled from his fingertips and traveled up the pot into the soil. Immediately the plant perked up.

“I’ve been meaning to stop into *Kettles and Cats*, but everything around here has been so busy,” Bonnie said. “So I haven’t had a chance. How about you take that one as a gift?”

“Oh, I couldn’t,” Theo said.

Bonnie chuckled. “Sure you can. Now, I expect you to hang that in your shop, and when I stop in, I’ll visit it.”

“I can’t guarantee I won’t send you home with a cat in return,” Theo said and waved his hand over the array of plants. Magic trickled down from his fingers and onto the leaves. One by one the plants enlivened, yellow leaves turning to bright green. Any dead parts fell away.

“Deal.” The florist clapped the elf on the back, beaming. “And you can stop by *anytime*.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



New plants tended to raise Theo's mood. Particularly when they had been a gift. Even the shops lining the streets seemed happier.

Humming a little tune and holding his brand-new plant, Theo was nearly at the café when his stomach dropped to the cobblestone street. His pace slowed to a crawl.

Sitting at the outdoor table in front of *Kettles and Cats* were Arleta . . . and his mother. Theo halted and blinked multiple times . . . then one more time in hopes that he was somehow hallucinating. But the scene remained unchanged. Although her back was to him, there was no doubt in his mind that the head of white-blonde hair belonged to Shalina Brylar.

“Oh, stars,” Theo muttered and nearly lost his grip on the plant. He’d wanted to talk with her again, but what was she saying to Arleta?

His head coming back to him, Theo uprooted his feet and hurried toward the café, thoughts bombarding his mind. Was his mother taking out her frustrations on Arleta? Guilt flooded his chest and veins. By taking a ride on Nimbus, going to the spell shop and stopping to buy a plant, he’d left Arleta completely unprotected. He cursed himself under his breath before squinting to get a better look at his Fated’s expression. Her features were placid. She didn’t look alarmed, but maybe she was holding in a brewing storm. Trying to be the strong one.

Arleta picked up her steaming mug and sipped whatever liquid she had inside.

As Theo drew closer, Arleta's gaze flicked from Shalina to him. Her lips arched slightly at the corners . . . not much, but a distinguishable amount.

What does that mean? Theo thought. Still gripping his plant, he picked up the pace. Seconds later he was at the edge of the table standing over both Arleta and Shalina, his chest heaving.

"Oh, Theodmon," his mother said as she met his eyes.

"What are you do—" Theo managed to get out before Arleta cut him off.

"Your mother and I were having the most interesting conversation," Arleta said and gestured to the open seat at the table.

His mind spinning, Theo glanced at the three cats sitting in the window staring at him, then beyond them to Sarson preparing drinks for two fairies flying in front the counter. *What receptacle is he serving them in?* The thought came and went.

Sarson wasn't acting alarmed, and neither was Arleta. So maybe he didn't need to be either . . . but his pounding heart and the magic issuing from his hands beneath the plant leaves had not received the message.

"Theo," Arleta insisted, breaking the elf from his thoughts. "Why don't you sit?"

He gulped and made his way around to the other side of the table, pulled out the chair and slowly lowered himself into the seat while placing the plant in front of him.

Shalina reached out to the small plate of cat-shaped cookies. She picked up one with a patchy calico design, inspected it and then took a bite. After chewing and swallowing she said, "You really are a talented baker, Arleta."

Theo furrowed his brow. The statement was true, but why was she saying it? "Mother, I told you that you can't just pretend nothing happened."

Completely unlike herself, Shalina kept her mouth shut and took another bite of her cookie.

"She's not," Arleta said and plucked the other cookie, that one a black cat with a tiny curled white mustache under their nose. "Shalina came back to apologize to me."

"Really?" Theo's shocked attention whipped to his mother.

"I am capable of making an apology," Shalina said and fiddled with the remainder of her cookie.

Theo was skeptical—it had been an age since she'd done so.

Arleta pushed back from the table and stood. “I’m going back to the bakery since I’m sure Tae needs me. But I think it would be a good idea for you both to talk again.” She reached out and placed her hand on Theo’s shoulder before gathering her half-eaten cookie and mug. “Thank you for stopping by, Shalina.”

Theo’s mother nodded. “It was good to have our conversation.”

With that Arleta left and went back inside.

“Did you really apologize to her?” Theo asked while keeping his voice down, still suspicious of Shalina’s intentions. He pushed the plant away from himself and stared intently at his mother.

Then she did something he hadn’t seen her do in a long time. She reached out to the plant and stroked a leaf. Green sparkling magic rolled off her fingers and intertwined with the leaves and stems. The plant’s color intensified, and after a moment the entire thing grew as if it had just been hit with a burst of sunlight.

As quickly as it had come, her magic vanished. Shalina pulled her hand back and placed it flat on the table. “Theo, I’ve forgotten about the person I was before—”

She stopped speaking, but Theo knew exactly what she meant.

“—before Kellam’s passing . . . your father . . . consumed me,” Shalina continued. “In truth, I’m honestly not sure if I can change. I’ve been . . . like this for a very long time.”

Unsure if he should speak or remain silent, Theo pulled his hands onto his lap while a gnome and their child walked past and entered the café. When they crossed the threshold, the fluffy orange cat, one of those that had been diligently staring at Theo, broke rank and followed behind the gnomes.

Shalina shrugged. “But I can’t remain stagnant either. Doing so will destroy me eventually.”

“Did you come to this on your own?” Theo asked, his attention back to his mother. He wondered if Verdreth had spoken to her after all.

After pursing her lips for a moment, Shalina admitted, “With all the days I’ve had to myself here in Adenashire, I’ve had a lot of time to think. There were so many things I wanted to say to you. But when I tried . . . they came out all wrong. I was about to leave when Faylin came to see me.”

“Faylin?” Theo’s brows arched in surprise.

She nodded. “He reminded me that sometimes we tell ourselves stories. They protect us from harm . . . until they don’t.”

“That’s one of his best pieces of advice,” Theo said with a slight chuckle. “I guess I’d forgotten it as well.”

“He’s said it to you?” Shalina asked with a tinge of surprise.

Theo shrugged. “Once. We all have those stories in our lives. I used to tell myself, for far too long, that Father would come back. That he’d tell us both how sorry he was and that he was wrong. Then we’d all be a happy family again.” Theo paused. “Without Kellam, of course.”

“We must have been reading the same storybooks.” Shalina drew her hand to her mouth, resting her finger above her lip. “I think we needed a new library.” She chuckled nervously.

Theo reached out and fiddled with a plant leaf between his finger and thumb.

“I’ll remind you again, Theo,” Shalina said earnestly. “You’re not like him. You might share looks . . . but you’re not like him. In fact, you’re much more like my father.”

Theo’s grandfather had died before he was born, so he hadn’t known him. And Shalina didn’t talk about the elf . . . at least she hadn’t in a very long time.

“How?” Theo asked, accidentally pinching off a leaf.

Shalina raked her hand through her hair, and it fell from her fingers like spun silk. “My father was an elf of honor. Loved my mother dearly. He was kind and gentle . . . and he’s probably why I took on heading up the Baking Battle. To keep a tiny piece of him close.”

The space between Theo’s brows creased. He’d never heard that before.

“Your grandfather loved baking. Not that he was very good at it.” Shalina chuckled. “That said, every year he made sure my entire family had a seat for the final. We’d wave flags and have playful wagers on who would win. The Battle was everything to him—and in turn to me.” She hung her head slightly before returning to Theo’s gaze. “I’d so looked forward to doing the same for you boys. Instead my life was overtaken by Kellam’s illness. So when everything fell apart, I needed a distraction. I applied to be on the competition committee . . . and it went from there. I was consumed by trying to get back everything I’d lost . . .”

“And you didn’t get any of it back,” Theo whispered.

Shalina flicked her ice blue gaze to her son. “You’re right. I lost it all. I lost myself . . . and you.” She sat silent for a bit before speaking again. “None of this is an excuse. I’m only telling you what happened. When Arleta entered the Battle last year and revealed herself to be human, I saw everything I had left slipping away. Once again my entire world was falling apart. The other judges loved the energy she brought to the competition, but I only saw loss. When I found out you were claiming to be her Fated, I was sure she had somehow tricked you . . . that she’d cheated in the Battle. In my mind there was no way a human could do so well without cheating. I allowed my rage, my bias, to rule me.”

Theo honestly had a hard time believing what was coming out of his mother’s mouth. She hadn’t shared anything real about herself in . . . he couldn’t remember the last time.

“Then you left,” she continued. “And I just tried to throw myself into something, anything to fill the void, that could give me meaning. I blamed you . . . I blamed Arleta. Everyone but myself. So when Wyn told me Arleta was pregnant, I couldn’t handle the news. I ended up here, wanting to give you a piece of my mind for leaving me out of something so important in my life.”

“It was about me, Mother,” Theo said. “Not you.”

She held her hand in the air. “I know. But that was my mindset. I’ve spent the years frittering away the relationship we should have had. Because of my pain, I stole that from you.”

“As well as yourself,” Theo said.

“Yes,” Shalina said. “It’s been a wasted life.”

That wasn’t entirely true, but it wasn’t his place to make his mother feel better about the things she’d done. These were her issues to work through. The healing she needed to experience.

Shalina blew out a long breath and smoothed her skirt. “Thank you for allowing me to say that. I’m going home today. There’s a carriage that leaves in two hours, and I have just enough time to pack and be on it.”

“I think that’s best,” Theo said, partially to test her sincerity but also because it was true.

She didn’t flinch. “Yes, it is. I have a lot of thinking to do, and a chance to get back to my roots.” She stroked the plant’s leaves again and her magic trickled off her fingertips. “Perhaps I’ll join the herbology society with my Aunt Soria.”

“Grandfather’s sister?” Theo asked. He hadn’t heard her name in an age.

“She’s been trying to get me to do it for years, and I’ve always said no since I was too busy with the Baking Battle. I think it’s time to rekindle those family relationships,” Shalina said. “But I do have one thing to ask of you.”

Theo’s body tensed, unsure what she might want from him. “What is it?” He tried to keep his voice steady.

“If you can write to me occasionally,” she said. “Tell me what’s happening to you . . . and Arleta. I’d like to write you back . . . just to know you’re okay.” Shalina paused for a second. “And I want you to know . . . I am truly sorry for what I’ve done to you.”

Theo blew out a sigh of relief. For so many years he’d wanted his mother in his life but never expected it to happen. There had been too much pain, too much grief.

They weren’t there yet. He wasn’t going to fool himself. Even so, that day was a starting point. A new seedling had been planted. It would have to be carefully tended, watered often, pruned and given plenty of sunshine. But one day it had a chance of becoming a full-grown tree.

Theo slid his hand across the table and placed it on Shalina’s. “Thank you.”

She gave him a soft smile he hadn’t seen in years. “I love you, Theo.” She placed her other hand to her heart. “You are more than I ever imagined.”

Without warning, the plant between them grew. And that’s how Theo knew Shalina was willing to change and her words were not empty.

There was hope.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



With Shalina headed back to pack, Theo went into the bakery. The place smelled heavily of the floral, sweet scent of bananas.

Taenya stood at the front counter arranging caramel-colored loaves in a display where five waited already. "If these don't sell, you're eating banana bread for the next week," she said.

He eyed the platter of samples next to her. Wanting to see what was in store for him, Theo plucked a small slice from the platter and popped it into his mouth. The soft bread, which of course tasted like bananas, nearly melted in his mouth, and the sprinkling of coarse sugar on top made it perfect.

"What are you talking about?" Theo asked, finishing his bite and sneaking a peek behind the counter where at least ten more loaves waited. "Everyone is going to love these."

The elf leaned across the counter and lowered her voice. "Not sure if she mentioned it to you, but Arleta was craving banana bread last week, so I told her to place a banana order." Taenya looked back toward the kitchen. "But she got a little over-zealous. There must still be a hundred bananas back there." She hunched over and put her hand to the side of her mouth. "And now she doesn't even want to eat them."

Theo bit his lip, thinking of the vast quantity of pickles and horseradish back at the cottage and hoped she'd still like those for a while. "They taste

delicious to me.” He picked up another sample and popped it into his mouth.

“Good,” Taenya said, reaching for the rest of the loaves. “Remember that when they end up your breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

Arleta came out of the back, wiping her hands on a white cotton towel with a little cupcake embroidered on it—likely Doli’s handiwork. “Those look great, Tae.” She pursed her lips. “But I don’t think I can manage even looking at another banana for”—her face contorted in disgust—“for a really long time.”

Her friend put on a pretty convincing smile and wrapped her arm around Arleta’s shoulder. Theo wanted to laugh but dared not. No one should make light of such a serious situation involving a pregnant person’s cravings. No one.

“I’ve got you,” Taenya said. “We can do a big banana bread sale at the market tomorrow. Since we, um, have so much stock.”

“Buy a loaf, get a cat for free?” Theo suggested since two cats sat at the passway opening, apparently waiting for him. “We can ask Doli to design the coupons.”

Arleta threw her towel onto the counter and waved toward the kitchen. “Whatever you need to do to get those bananas out of there.”

Despite his sympathy for Arleta’s on-again, off-again relationship with bananas, Theo smiled. He was glad to get back to some semblance of normal, whatever that was. Something told him it was on the way.

Theo took Arleta’s hand and pulled her away from the counter. He glanced over to Taenya and mouthed *thank you*.

She gave him a head bob in return.

“I’m sorry about that whole thing,” Theo said.

Arleta shrugged. “The bananas? Don’t worry, Tae will take care of it. A few weeks back I thought I wanted blueberries. So. Many. Muffins.”

“No,” Theo said, “my mother. I left you to fend for yourself.”

She glanced down at her feet for a shake. “It turned out okay.”

“She’s packing to go back to Langheim in a couple of hours,” Theo said as they walked toward the passway.

“Oh!” Arleta said, her face brightening as she seemingly forgot all about the bananas. “I didn’t expect her to leave so soon.”

“There’s a carriage headed there, and she wanted to be on it,” Theo said. “Did she really apologize to you?”

“She did. Obviously it was difficult for her. But she did, and it seemed genuine.” Arleta tipped her head in question. “Will we need to see her off?”

“No,” Theo said with a relieved sigh. “But I’m hopeful that things will get better from here on out.” He held his finger up. “And, best of all, she won’t be staying for months on end after the baby comes.”

Arleta threw her arms around his neck and squeezed him tight. “Thank you so much.”

Without hesitation, Theo returned the embrace and held her, inhaling her scent of bananas cut with vanilla, flour, and relief. Arleta was the first to release. She stretched up to kiss him but quickly backed up and scrunched her nose.

“What?” Theo asked, suddenly concerned.

“I love you, but you smell like banana bread,” she complained.

Theo laughed. He didn’t have the heart to tell her she smelled the same. “Well, we can’t have that.”

Arleta shook her head and gazed downward. “We most definitely cannot! This baby doesn’t like them at all anymore. They are incredibly finicky.” Then she bit her lip as if conjuring a thought. “Now . . . pickles. *That’s* an entirely different story.”

“I’ll keep that in mind—for the baby’s sake,” Theo said, giving her a wink instead of leaning in for a kiss. “I’ll see you later.”

“As long as you don’t smell like bananas,” she said.

Theo chuckled and entered the café. As he did, the waiting cats stood up and followed him.

The place was busier than he’d expected, and two unfamiliar faces stood behind the counter with Sarson. Actually, the faces looked almost the same since they appeared to be identical twins. Theo was about to ask Sarson about them but a seated customer caught him by the arm.

“Excuse me,” the woman said.

Theo threw on a big grin and turned to her. He was a little surprised to see a brown striped cat and a gray cat lounging on the human’s table, as well as a brown one curled up on her lap. All three cats were purring loudly. The woman seemed to have been maneuvering around them, attempting to enjoy her hot beverage and the lemon pastry with only one bite taken out. “What can I help you with?”

She turned her eyes down to the sleeping cat. “I’ve never had cats before. Is this normal?”

Normal? Theo wasn't really sure what was normal with cats. Particularly not the cats from the café that seemed to appear magically. He wasn't an authority on the matter, for stars' sake, but he'd do his best to answer her questions or refer her to one of the books on the bookcase.

"May I?" Theo gestured to the empty chair next to her.

"Of course." The woman seemed to mindlessly run her hand along the brown cat's spine, encouraging him to purr even louder.

Theo settled into the seat and scanned around at the other customers, who were either on the floor playing with a cat or two, sitting on the sofa with a cat to their side, or just resting peacefully at a table, enjoying the atmosphere. "Is what normal?" he asked, returning to the woman.

"Before I came in here," the woman explained, "everything seemed to be falling apart—"

Theo understood the feeling.

"—so I thought I might stop in here to put my mind back together. The café seemed like a good place to do it." Her attention moved to the counter and then back to Theo. "I ordered my drink—the Coconut Catpurrccino is delicious, by the way—got my order, then sat."

Everything she was saying seemed quite normal to Theo, but he wanted to let her finish in case he missed something.

"Was just minding my business and this cat—" she pointed to the gray one lounging on the table.

Fern, the cat's voice came into Theo's head. *My name is Fern.*

Theo flinched with surprise since none of the cats had spoken to him until that moment. "That's Fern," he said. Apparently they *had* been giving him the silent treatment. He supposed it was to let him figure out why they were there on his own.

"Oh, hello." The woman patted him on the head. "As I was saying, Fern jumped up on the table."

"That is pretty normal for cats," Theo said. "They're curious and what to be where the action is."

The woman shook her head. "Oh, I can see that. But it's not what I'm asking about. You see, the more I pet the cats . . . the more everything I was worried about isn't as pressing. Sitting here for the last half an hour, I've been able to come up with three ways I might try dealing with my problem. I couldn't help but wonder if these cats are magical or something?"

The question confirmed what Theo had decided after his talk with Faylin—these cats were indeed magical. Perhaps all cats in the Northern Lands were. The ones at the café just seemed to be more in tune with their jobs than the average cat. They seemed to share a little piece of Theo’s desire to help others. That made sense since he was the one who’d summoned them with the potion.

Theo reached out to the second striped cat in front of him and scratched her chin. Eyes still closed, she lifted her face while her little furry muzzle pinched just the slightest. “Yes, I think there is a little magic in each of them. From experience and the books I’ve read”—he gestured to the bookcase—“cats are very calming to the soul. If you let them. There are a few books over there on the topic.”

The woman chuckled. “I think I’ve needed a cat most of my life and didn’t know it.”

“Maybe you do. These three sure seem to have chosen their person.” Theo bowed his head slightly before he stood. “I’ll leave you to it.”

He made his way over to the counter, where Sarson stood pouring steaming milk into a cup. The twin dryads were delivering orders to a family of brown-furred castors sitting on the floor using a fishing pole to keep a group of cats interested. One of the smallest waved her flat tail at a black kitten.

The young women serving the beverages were tall and willowy with long green hair a few shades darker than their skin tied into a ponytail.

“Who are they?” Theo asked, leaning his elbow onto the counter.

Sarson turned to retrieve a glass bottle of vanilla syrup. “They’ve been in here a couple of times, and the cats and customers love them. I figured we might be ready to hire a few people since the café is doing so well.” The gargoyle gave Theo a half smile. “But don’t worry—today they’re just helping out since they asked to. I wouldn’t do anything permanent without talking to you first.”

Theo hadn’t considered hiring help quite yet, but he hadn’t really had time to think about it. “It’s a good idea. How about you offer them a permanent job? It will take the load off us. Plus dryads would never let any of the café’s plants die.”

Sarson gave Theo a wide grin and a casual salute. “Will do, boss.”

The elf chuckled at his friend. He didn’t really see himself as Sarson’s boss, even though technically he was since the café was his and Arleta’s.

Theo walked behind the counter and made himself a simple cup of tea with plenty of cream and sugar. He inspected the available baked goods, most of which that day were slices of banana bread. Deciding to avoid those for Arleta's sake, he picked the last dried cherry scone with bergamot glaze —Arleta's recipe from the Baking Battle.

"I need to take a breather for a bit," Theo told Sarson. "When I'm done, I'll clean up the back room."

Sarson shrugged. "You're the boss."

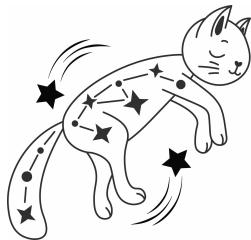
Theo patted his friend on the arm and then walked to an empty table at the back of the café. He set down his scone and tea and took a seat. Barely a bite into the wonderful sweet and tart scone, a white and gray cat jumped onto his lap, purring loudly and making himself at home.

The elf allowed a long sigh to exit his lips while he leaned back in his seat and sipped his tea. He was fairly certain by the cat's comfort level that neither of them would be getting up anytime soon.

And that was just fine with him.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



A few weeks later, the morning sky was streaked warm red and violet as the sun peeked over the horizon. Below that the street lanterns flickered their last gold and orange flames before going out.

Most of Adenashire was still asleep at that hour.

As Theo and Arleta walked hand in hand to the bakery and café, the elf inhaled the crisp morning air into his lungs. His Fated had wrapped herself in a cozy, multicolored knitted shawl to stave off the morning chill. In a few hours it would likely morph into a pleasantly warm spring day.

“Is it like this every day?” Theo asked. Before his epiphany he’d gone into the café early to tend the cats and work on morning chores before it opened. But his head had been elsewhere—worrying about parenthood, his mother, and the never-ending stream of anxiety-conjured cats—so he’d barely noticed the journey.

He was finally starting to internalize the fact that he couldn’t know the future, so worrying about mistakes that hadn’t been made yet was fruitless. Instead he’d realized it was better to focus on the task at hand, and when the next sunrise glided into the sky, to concern himself with whatever came that day.

Arleta squeezed Theo’s hand and gazed upward. “Most times. It’s one of the reasons I enjoy taking the early shift so much. The walk from the cottage to the bakery is the perfect distance to clear my head.”

“It’s nice,” Theo said. “I think I’ll miss it when Begonia and Nettlelea take over most of the shifts.”

He and Sarson still wanted to work together a few times a week, but once the baby came, Theo would need to be more flexible. The twins really enjoyed the cats and telling customers how they might improve their lives, as well as tending to the café. And so far they’d done an amazing job. Plus, if there were any issues, Arleta and Taenya were right next door.

As they walked further down the road, Maven, the owner of *The Tricky Goat*, stood outside the inn sweeping the stairs with a well-used broom. The lantern lights outside the inn flickered one last time and then went out.

“Morning, Maven,” Arleta called, her voice bright and chirpy, reminding Theo of Doli’s sunny demeanor.

Theo loved seeing his Fated so happy. Nothing in life brought him more joy.

The dark-haired woman, wearing a dark green calf-length dress, looked up from her work and gave them a toothy smile. “Oh, good morning you two.”

Typically the innkeeper looked tired and overworked—so much so that for a while, she’d even thought of selling *The Goat*. But that morning there was something different about her.

“How’s it going with Midnight?” Theo asked as he and Arleta stopped in front of the inn, still holding hands.

Maven sucked her teeth and leaned on her broom. “You know? I wasn’t sure it was going to work out at all for a few days since he was keeping me up all night wanting to play. But we’ve really fallen into a routine. It’s like that little guy has given me a new life.”

The week prior, Maven had dropped into *Kettles and Cats* to see what all the fuss around town was about—that, and she still had to use a buy one, get one free coupon from the market that expired soon.

A large but thin black cat wouldn’t allow Maven to leave without him. He’d blocked the way each time she tried, butted her on the leg and kept singing a chorus until she took him home.

To try out the fit.

Arleta chuckled. “So he won’t be returning to the café, I presume?”

“Stars, no.” Maven lightly swept the other side of the stairs, and a cloud of dust kicked into the air. “He greets me when I get home, brings me little felted fish toys as gifts, and snuggles me at night. Then he listens to me

intently about my day. He only asks that I love and feed him.” She chortled. “Couldn’t ask for much more in a man.”

Arleta’s eyes crinkled at the corners as she looked at Theo. “Soulmates come in all forms.”

“All the cats seem to know who needs them,” Theo said. “I figured a trial period would work for both of you.”

Maven leaned on the broom again, pressing the bristles into the worn wooden stairs. “In fact, I’ve been eyeing a second. The other black one with the bright greenish yellow eyes. I see them in the café window every time I walk by.”

“Oh . . . Punkin?” Theo asked.

“Is that their name?” Maven asked and pinched her lips together. “Maybe I can pick them up today after the lunch rush. If one cat is great, how much better will two be, right?”

Theo’s insides filled with joy. “It can be hard to stop at one.”

“Who better to know that than you?” Arleta elbowed Theo lightly in jest.

The elf’s cheeks flushed. “Um . . . yes. But I think I’ll be sticking with Faylin at home for now—he’s quite enough feline for us. I can visit all the cats I want at the café.”

“Well, I’d better get back to work,” Maven said. “But I’d appreciate it if you hold Punkin for me.”

Glad to have found another cat’s forever home, Theo said, “Sure thing. I’ll tell her you’re coming when we get there.”

Theo and Arleta continued on to the café, and she cuddled into his upper arm. “Remember how you lived at *The Tricky Goat* for months before I got my act together and admitted I loved you?”

“Yes?” Theo’s stomach whirled at the words since it was a time he didn’t often dwell on.

“Let’s never do *that* again,” Arleta said and pulled him in closer. “I like it when we share the same spaces.”

Theo stopped her in the middle of the street. He scanned around at the scattering of shop owners starting their daily routines and then brought his attention back to Arleta. Her hazel eyes almost sparkled as she returned his gaze.

Being pregnant, her face had changed slightly over the last months. Her cheeks were a tad rounder, and her skin had a soft glow. And he was pretty sure her nose had widened. Theo loved the look. She was like a flutterbee

emerging from her cocoon and becoming someone new. “Yes. Let’s not.” Arleta raised up on her toes, slipped her hand around his neck and into the back of his hair. The spot tingled and descended all the way down his back as he kissed her.

To Theo, every kiss with his Fated was better than the last, as was every day . . . every moment.

She was everything to him.

“I love you, Arleta Starstone,” he said, breaking the kiss to get a look at her again.

Her grin turned wry. “I know.” Then Arleta giggled and grabbed his hand, pulling him the rest of the way to the café. Punkin sat looking out the window, stretched up on all fours as if she was waiting for someone.

Once inside the cats bombarded them both, squawking for their breakfast, so Theo didn’t get a chance to speak to her.

“Don’t worry, babies,” Arleta said as she bent down to pet one of a trio of orange cats who’d gathered at her feet. “We’ll fill those bowls.”

Theo scanned over the clowder. “One, two, three . . . seven, eight . . .” He looked back toward the open storage room door and spotted several more. “I think we have sixteen.”

Arleta stood and rested her hand on her right hip. “What happens to the place when we run out of cats? Do we just go back to it being the *Sip and Stay* or something?”

A tortie who looked very much like Patches, the orcs’ cat, bumped Theo’s leg with her head. “See, that’s the thing. Yesterday when I left, we had fifteen.”

Arleta furrowed her brows in confusion. “There’s another? You probably counted wrong.”

Theo searched the room and pointed to a light brown and cream colorpoint, who may or may not have been cross-eyed, lounging on the end of the counter against the wall. “Yeah. I thought that was happening too, but I’m not counting wrong every day. And I haven’t seen him before. What’s your name, sir?” Theo called to the new cat.

Monroe.

The name came into Theo’s head. “Welcome, Monroe. I hope you enjoy your stay.” He turned back to Arleta. “So, I could be wrong, but I think when a cat goes home with a family, a new one replaces it.”

“Did you talk to Ibus about this?” Arleta asked as she walked into the back, opened a large container and began filling cat bowls with food.

Theo followed her and leaned against the doorframe. “Several times. That wizard is fascinated with this whole experiment of ours. He wants me to come to his shop and report once a week. His theory is that with the baby coming, my anxiety will probably never leave entirely, and the cats might keep coming. And when a café cat finds their home, another will appear.”

Arleta chuckled. “You’re owning the *experiment* now?”

“Might as well,” Theo said and plucked a spotted cat from the floor. “Since it doesn’t look like it’s ending anytime soon.”

“How about you make me a Cranpurry Tea, and I’ll finish up in here,” Arleta said.

“Sure.” Theo took the spotted cat and plopped him on the counter while getting to work on Arleta’s drink.

Not long after, the cats were fed and Theo had mugs ready for himself and Arleta. Since they had a few minutes before they needed to get to work, they settled at the café table nearest the bakery passway.

“So,” Arleta said, sipping her tea, “I’ve been writing to your mother.”

Theo’s brows shot up and he nearly choked on his coffee. “Really?”

Arleta nodded. “I want to give her a chance, and if we never or rarely speak, how can we get to know each other? That, plus we’ve all had so much loss when it comes to our families. I should be willing to fight hard to mend what was broken, particularly if she’s willing. Not only for us but for our baby.” She placed her hand on the top of her bump.

Theo reached out and rested his hand on hers. “Thank you for your optimism.”

Arleta took another drink. “That, and a willingness to call her out if she gets out of line.”

“You told her that?” Theo asked, his eyes widening.

After setting down her mug, Arleta reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out a letter. “Read it. After you do, you can pop it in the mail.” She slid the envelope across the table to him.

“Are you sure you want me to?” He picked up the letter, addressed to Shalina Bryar in Langheim, The Northern Lands, in Arleta’s neat handwriting.

His Fated shrugged while wrapping both of her hands around her warm mug. “Your choice.”

Before he could open the unsealed letter, Punkin jumped onto his lap.

“Oh, Punkin,” Theo said, looking the silky black cat in the eyes. “I heard you’ve been stalking Maven through the window.”

The cat stared at him blankly and blinked once before she sat. *I wouldn’t call it stalking.*

Arleta giggled at the exchange even though she couldn’t hear what the cat was saying.

“Well,” he said, stuffing the letter into his pocket to read later, “whatever it was, it seems your grand plan worked. She’ll be coming in to pick you up after lunch.”

The cat stood and butted her head into Theo’s jaw. Theo gave her a scratch under the chin before she leaped onto the floor and sauntered off to her place by the window. When she’d gotten comfortable, her tail swept the floor behind her.

The café door swung open and Sarson walked in. “Morning,” he said in his deep voice, sounding more chipper than usual.

Theo glanced at the clock on the wall. “You’re early. I thought you weren’t coming in until later.”

Sarson looked around the space as he entered. “Oh . . . I need to take care . . .” He trailed off and bent to look under a table, then stood upright again.

“Did you lose something?” Arleta asked as she pushed her chair back, the legs scraping the floor.

“Kind of,” Sarson muttered, but his eyes brightened as he looked toward the back of the shop. “There he is.”

Arleta and Theo turned to see whatever Sarson was looking at. Shadow was grooming himself on the top perch of the cat tree with his striped tabby leg in the air like a contortionist. As everyone stared, he stopped what he was doing and left his pink tongue sticking out from his mouth.

“Doli won’t stop talking about him,” Sarson said. “So I thought I’d get up early, come down here to get the little guy, and surprise her when she wakes up.”

“That’s so sweet,” Arleta said and pushed her chair under the table. “I have cookies to bake, but I hope Doli loves Shadow.”

“Oh,” Sarson said as he walked to the back of the café and gathered the tabby from his perch. The cat lounged in the gargoyle’s massive arms. “She will be thrilled.”

“I’ll see you later then,” Theo said to his friend.

“You will.” Sarson held the cat up closer to his face and said in a high-pitched voice, “You’re going home to your new mommy.”

As Sarson left, Arleta kissed Theo on the cheek. “Love you.”

Theo grinned and eyed her. “I know.”

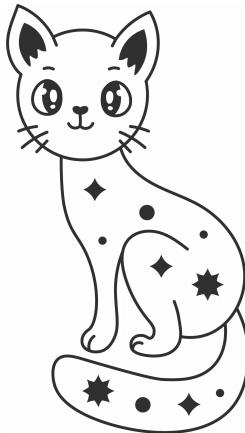
Arleta chuckled and shook her head, then left for the bakery.

Theo’s eyes traveled around the space. Now there were only fifteen cats. He picked up his and Arleta’s cups from the table and turned back to push in his chair. There on the seat lay a sleeping calico—one he was certain was new to the café.

Theo didn’t ask questions about where the cats actually came from but accepted that they served a magical purpose for both himself and Adenashire. It was a purpose he was happy to “experiment” with.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



“**A**nd here we go.” Theo walked into the bedroom, where Arleta sat propped up by several fluffy pillows. Balanced on her extremely swollen belly was a book titled *Parenting Elves in the Northern Lands*.

Faylin lay curled up at the end of the bed, looking like a cozy white and brown cinnamon roll that happened to have fur. His dark striped tail wrapped perfectly around his body.

He had barely left Arleta’s side in the last month since the baby was coming soon.

Arleta was so engrossed in the book that she didn’t seem to notice Theo carrying possibly the strangest breakfast combination known in the Northern Lands. The tray held toast spread with a healthy dollop of lime curd, since she’d decided she liked lime again. Then on a separate plate, since for the time being Arleta would tolerate none of her foods touching, were exactly five whole pickles (whole was a must) arranged in a line. Last, two small dishes held one tablespoon each, no more, no less, of horseradish and peanut butter. Despite the no-touching rule, Arleta always ended up mixing those together into a concoction Theo didn’t want to understand, and she ate them last.

Theo didn’t ask questions about Arleta’s cravings; he only fulfilled them. She was growing another person inside of herself, for stars’ sake.

He placed the tray on the side table next to his Fated and gestured to the glass of brightly colored juice. “Fresh squeezed tangerine juice, as requested.”

Arleta tore her attention from the book and gazed over at the juice. The second her eyes landed on it, she wrinkled her nose. “I know you did all the work getting it from the shop. But I can’t possibly drink that anymore.”

She’d wanted tangerine juice for three days straight. Wouldn’t drink anything else.

Theo snatched the revolting juice from the tray and placed it on the dresser, right next to the small painting of his brother that Ervash had made for him a few weeks prior. Of course, Theo was prepared to take the glass out of the room as soon as he got her settled with breakfast. In his experience, when a food or drink landed in wrinkled-nose territory, it needed to go. She didn’t want it anywhere near her.

“Don’t go,” Arleta said.

Theo rounded to her, and she patted the bed on her side.

“Are you sure?” he asked since she had been enjoying her quiet time in the mornings lately. Plus there was the dreaded juice still in the room. “I can get you something else to drink.”

She shook her head and patted the bed again. “I want your company more.”

Theo marveled at how beautiful she looked in the morning light streaming through the bedroom window. Just as amazing as the first time he’d laid eyes on her, except more content and less confused and mildly annoyed by her attraction to him.

She wore a white cotton nightgown with a pattern of little white flowers stitched along the collar and at the end of the short sleeves. Her long chestnut hair fell over her shoulders in soft waves.

A shy grin stretched over Theo’s mouth, and he moved around to the other side of the bed. He climbed in and shifted next to her, propping his pillow to match hers and trying not to disturb Faylin.

The lynx muttered something Theo didn’t catch and flicked his front paw out. Soon after, he licked his chops, then settled back into a snoring slumber.

Arleta placed the book face down on top of her stomach and pursed her lips.

“Everything okay?” Theo asked. “Really, I can get you anything else for breakfast if you don’t like it. I don’t mind.”

Arleta turned her head to face him, something brewing behind her hazel eyes. “How is it I deserve you?”

A flush came over him. He could have—and had—said something to the same effect. “Are you okay?” he asked, suddenly concerned.

Arleta sucked her teeth as if she were trying to hold back something that needed to bear the light. Before speaking, she reached over for a pickle and bit off the end. “What if she was right?”

“What if *who* was right?” Theo’s pulse thudded in his ears in time with the sounds of Arleta munching the crunchy pickle.

She placed the partially eaten pickle back on the plate beside her, closed the book and put it aside. “Your mother.”

“What did she say?” Theo’s brows shot up, ready to be offended by whatever his mother had said.

“No, no,” Arleta insisted. “She’s been very kind in her letters. But I’m just thinking back. What if she was right when she said I might not understand how to raise a child that has magic?” Arleta ran her hands over her forehead and tipped her head to the book on the side table. “I can’t find much about it. Everything I read assumes humans have magicless children and everyone else doesn’t.”

Theo’s chest constricted with pain. He never wanted Arleta to feel as if she were less than. However, just blurting that out didn’t seem like the right response. He didn’t want to sweep aside her concern as if it were nothing. He needed to help her see how capable she was.

“How am I ever going to parent a child *without* magic?” Theo asked instead.

Arleta’s expression twisted. “What do you mean, no magic?” She looked down again. “Of course our child is going to have magic. They’re half elf.”

“We won’t know that until they arrive,” he said, placing his hand on top of hers. “Even then magic isn’t usually apparent as an infant. Mine didn’t completely manifest until I was about eight.”

Arleta’s eyes brightened with interest before she shook her head. “Of course you’d be a good dad. Even if they’re magicless.”

“How do you know?” Theo asked. “I grew up surrounded by magic and I use it every day.”

“Because you’ll love them and want the best for them,” she said. “And you’re willing to learn about things you don’t understand.”

Theo tipped his head and brought his hand to cup Arleta’s soft cheek. He stared deep into her eyes.

“What?” she said, obviously confused.

“Everything you just said applies to you too.”

Arleta shook her head. “It’s not the same thing.”

“Of course it is,” he insisted. “In the last year and a half you’ve changed and grown so much. It doesn’t take magic to love and care. We’ve already proven that many times over.”

She still didn’t seem convinced.

“Look,” Theo said. “We can’t fool ourselves that it will be easy, because it won’t be. But I’m trying to accept that I just need to stay open . . . open to whatever comes our way. And if we need help, we have plenty since neither of us is alone on this journey. We have friends and family.”

“You’re right.” Arleta’s gaze softened. “I guess if you can do this, so can I.”

“You *are* stronger than me, after all,” Theo said.

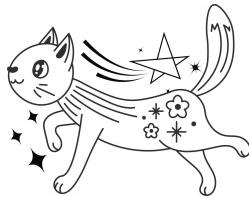
Arleta chuckled. “I’m not sure about that, but we’re stronger together.” She paused for a beat. “I love you so much.”

Theo leaned in and kissed his Fated on the lips. He couldn’t picture a better partner to travel the journey of life with. “I love you too.”

Down at the end of the bed, Faylin had sat up and was staring at Theo and Arleta. He cleared his throat. “Now, if that’s all figured out, I wouldn’t mind a little something to eat. It’s well past my mealtime.”

Theo and Arleta broke into laughter at the lynx’s request, and Theo knew everything would be more than fine.

EPILOGUE



VERDRETH

“**Y**ou have it, right?” Verdreth’s voice quivered with excitement as he allowed Ervash through the back door of It’s About Tome, a large, oddly shaped package under his massive arm. Verdreth had closed the bookshop early that day, not only to prepare for the party but also to take a few minutes alone to calm his very big nerves.

Orc-sized nerves.

“What do you think this is?” Ervash scoffed. His linen shirt was buttoned up a little farther than usual, partly for protection against kitten claws and partly because Verdreth wanted everything just so for the night. Ervash held the paper-wrapped object out to his partner of nearly thirty-two years as if to prove it existed. “Of course I’ve got it.”

Verdreth nabbed the parcel and turned back toward the heart of the bookshop, nearly tripping over Checkers, their black and white kitten who spent her days at the store “helping” Verdreth and his customers.

In the three months since they'd gotten her, the kitten had at least doubled in size but was still tiny compared to the orcs. That would never change. After a yowl of displeasure, Checkers sprinted away and jumped onto the table Verdreth had so carefully set for the party. She zigzagged around the delicate china he'd laid out for each guest, then sat at the end with the two place cards marked "Arleta" and "Theo" in Verdreth's best handwriting. Their other cat, Patches, popped her head up from Arleta's reserved seat, sleep heavy in her eyes.

Verdreth had rewritten each of the place cards at least four times to get the right look.

A small buffet smelling of hearty beef stew, stuffed chicken pies and cheesy roasted vegetables was already set up nearby. Everything had been ordered from The Tricky Goat with the help of Maven the innkeeper except for the array of small loaves from the bakery and a stunning cake Taenya had delivered earlier without Arleta realizing it was for her.

The three-tiered cake was topped off with a small marzipan arch resembling the bay leaf one that both Arleta and Theo had seen in their Fated dreams. Cascading down the sides were vines, leaves and flowers expertly crafted in colorful frosting. It was magical.

Verdreth had expected nothing less when he'd asked Taenya to make it since the elf had won the one hundredth Baking Battle in Langheim.

Verdreth lugged the weighty package into the space he'd set up for gifts and carefully placed it on the floor. When he straightened, the orc wiped the beads of sweat pooling on his brow.

"You're getting old," Ervash said with a chuckle.

Verdreth turned toward him, sure the sweat was much more about nervousness. "Not any older than you, dear." He let out a hearty laugh and motioned to the graying hair at Ervash's temples. "You know you're going to be a grandpa?"

"So I heard," Ervash said plainly.

Verdreth gazed down at the package again, pursing his lips as he studied it. "You checked to make sure it was right? Do I need to check?"

"Why do you doubt me?" Ervash held out his sizeable hand and Verdreth turned to regard it.

After a deliberate breath out, Verdreth gratefully took his partner's grasp and squeezed before drawing him into a tight hug. Ervash's tusk pressed into Verdreth's shoulder as they furthered the extremely warm embrace.

“You’re going to do a good job,” Ervash whispered into his ear.

“Are you sure?” The question was barely audible from Verdreth’s mouth.

Ervash pulled back slightly, looking his partner directly in the eyes. He reached up and pushed Verdreth’s glasses up from where they had fallen to the end of his nose. “Because you love them.”

The orc nearly melted at the words.

Verdreth did love Arleta . . . and Theo too if he had to admit it. He couldn’t have loved them more if they were children from his own orc blood. He could barely imagine how much he was going to love their child . . . his grandchild.

“And it’s enough,” Ervash whispered. After a shuttered breath, he leaned in and kissed Verdreth.

Verdreth loved Ervash too. Deeply.

He couldn’t imagine sharing his life with anyone else . . . even if he never would have thought it possible when they first met.

“Did we interrupt something?” Jez’s voice came from the store entrance and the orcs parted.

“I thought I locked that door,” Verdreth said and turned to Jez, who sported a smirk.

“Apparently not,” Taenya said, coming in behind the fennex and holding the door open for Doli and Sarson.

The rainbow-colored dress Doli wore almost rivaled Taenya’s cake.

Behind her Sarson carried multiple packages balanced in his arms, and by the alarm in his eyes he probably figured he was about to drop them all.

“Here, let me help.” Verdreth hurried over and took several from the gargoyle’s pile.

“Thanks,” Sarson said, obviously relieved.

Verdreth led him over to the where the orcs’ wrapped package sat on the floor. “We can put them here.” They both arranged the neatly wrapped gifts, then straightened and stepped back.

Verdreth grasped Sarson’s shoulder, avoiding the wings pinned tightly to his back. The two of them actually had a lot in common, Verdreth being a purveyor of books and Sarson a former librarian. Over the last year, they had spent many afternoons discussing the arts, new books and science. The orc had really enjoyed his friendship.

“Is that what I think it is?” Doli clapped her hands together in joy over the enormous gift.

“Yep.” Ervash beamed. “I picked it up today.”

Verdreth’s attention shifted to the package again and then up to the ticking clock on the wall, which read 6:58. His heart leaped. “They’re going to be here soon!”

The entire group looked around each other, frozen in a mild panic.

“Hide,” Verdreth ordered.

Everyone scurried to somewhere out of direct sight of the door. Verdreth and Ervash tried squeezing behind the same bookshelf, but their large bodies hung out on either side.

“It doesn’t matter,” Verdreth whispered. “They’re going to see us anyway.”

They heard the door swing open. “Verdreth told me he saved a special snack for me, and I wanted to pick it up.” Faylin’s too-loud voice came from the entrance.

Theo scoffed lightly. “You couldn’t wait for dinner—”

Before he finished his sentence, the friends jumped from their hiding places. “Surprise!” they all shouted.

Both Theo and Arleta stood just inside the doorway, stunned.

When she unfroze, Arleta’s hands slipped to her very round belly. “You all trying to make this happen early?” No one said a word until Arleta smiled and took Theo’s hand. “This is all for us?”

Verdreth was the first to reach his daughter. “It’s all for you.” Tears formed in his eyes, and he could barely believe how fortunate he was.

Arleta gazed up and brought her hand to Verdreth’s neck. “Thanks . . . Grandpa.” Then she hugged him tight.

For a moment the love built up so strongly inside Verdreth’s chest that he wasn’t sure he could stand it.

“You tricked us,” Theo half-scolded Faylin, who sat with a smirk, twitching his dark striped tail.

“Anything for a buffet,” the lynx said with a wink to Verdreth.

Happy to be saved by the joke, Verdreth released Arleta, chuckled, and turned to the group with his arms wide. “Yes. Let’s eat, then open the gifts!”

For the next hour Verdreth savored the feast with his family. True, none of them were related by blood, but that had never mattered. What they all did have was worth so much more. And there was a baby coming that would only tie them closer.

“Mrrrow,” Checkers trilled from atop the enormous parcel from the orcs.

“Should we move on to the gifts?” Doli asked, looking around the table.

Theo stood and held his hand out to Arleta. “Why not? I can’t eat another bite.”

With a little trouble and help, she stood and waddled over near the gifts with Theo.

Jez wrapped her arms around Taenya. “I say we start with the big one.”

“Are you sure?” Verdreth said, his gaze wavering between Jez and Ervash. He didn’t want to be rude and push their gift. But he really wanted them to open it.

“Nothing wrong with starting strong,” Ervash said and looked at Arleta. “Verdreth is very excited about it.” He gave his partner a crooked smile.

Which, of course, sent a flutter to Verdreth’s heart since the expression was what had originally won him over. He shrugged. “Sure, why not? Open it.”

Arleta and Theo pulled the paper off, revealing a gorgeous wooden bassinet. The headboard was covered with intricate floral carvings above the spot where the baby would lie.

“Oh, stars!” Arleta exclaimed. Tears in her eyes, she hurried to hug Verdreth, then Ervash.

“I hope you like it,” Verdreth said.

“You know I do.” Arleta kissed them both while Faylin wandered over to the bassinet and sniffed it.

“Great cat bed,” he said, and without missing a beat Checkers leaped inside and curled up like a sweet roll. Without an invitation, Patches joined her.

“I guess we need another one for the baby,” Arleta joked.

The room went quiet for a tick, then, led by Verdreth, they all broke into raucous laughter that echoed through the bookshop.

The orc loved his life . . . every last bit.

“To whatever lies ahead!” Verdreth held his glass high and toward his friends and partner.

“To whatever lies ahead,” they all called in unison.



Through the evening this fellowship laughed in the golden candlelight, with full bellies and hearts beside a trio of blissful cats. Of course, on their own occasions they each had felt a little cursed, but they always seemed to get past it with the help of good food and good friends.

And none of them could wait to find out what the future had written in the stars.

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RECIPES OF ADENASHIRE



These recipes were fun to make (about five times each... not kidding). I hope you and the ones you love enjoy them together.

Lime Shortbread Cookies

This shortbread was actually a big hit in my house. They are pleasantly delicious.

Ingredients

- 1 stick of slightly softened unsalted butter, sliced (113 grams)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup powdered sugar (50 grams)
- $1 \frac{1}{2}$ cup all-purpose flour (180 grams)
- Up to 1 tablespoon lime zest
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt (3 grams)

For the glaze

- 1 cup powdered sugar (120 grams)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon vanilla extract (7.4 milliliters)
- 1- $1\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons half-and-half or milk (22 milliliters)
- 1 tablespoon lime juice (15 grams)
- 1 teaspoon lime zest to sprinkle on top of the glaze
- 1 teaspoon corn syrup

Instructions:

Shortbread

1. Using a food processor, combine the butter and powdered sugar until the mixture just comes together.
2. Add flour, salt and lime zest to the mixture and pulse until it looks the size of small peas. The mixture should not appear “floury”.

3. Pour the mixture onto a prepared, clean work surface (or wax paper). Using your hands, gently knead and form the dough into an approximately 3x6 inch rectangle-shaped log. Don't overwork it but make sure all edges are tidy and squared off. Next, wrap the dough log tightly in plastic wrap, wax paper or a piece of parchment and chill for at least 30 minutes in the refrigerator.
4. When you are nearly ready to bake the shortbread, preheat oven to 400F and prepare a baking sheet with parchment paper.
5. When the dough is completely chilled, remove and slice into 8 equal rectangle-shaped pieces and place on parchment. Make sure the edges are as sharp and square as possible.
6. Bake for 10-12 minutes until very lightly brown on the bottom. Do not over bake.
7. Remove from oven and cool completely on a wire baking rack.

Glaze drizzle

1. Combine all glaze ingredients (except lime zest) in a medium bowl and whisk together until smooth.
2. Once the cookies are cool, drizzle the glaze over them. I suggest using a piping bag with a small tip or pour the glaze into a zip top bag and snip off a small part of the corner.
3. Sprinkle lime zest over the still wet glaze.
4. Once the glaze has hardened, enjoy your shortbread with a cup of tea.

Chocolate “Adenashire” Sheet Cake (Texas Sheet Cake)

I hadn’t had Texas Sheet Cake in at least 35 five years. So I was happy to share it with my mom who used to make the dessert for our family. (Spoiler alert—she loved it.)

Ingredients

- 2 cups all-purpose flour (260 grams)
- 1 ½ cups sugar (300 grams)
- ½ cup cocoa powder (43 grams)
- ¼ teaspoon salt (1.5 grams)
- 1 teaspoon baking soda (4 grams)
- 12 tablespoons (1½ sticks or ¾ cup) melted unsalted butter (170 grams)
- 1 cup hot water (227 grams)
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup buttermilk (227 grams)
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract (15 milliliters)
- Optional chopped pecans or walnuts (see note at the end).

Chocolate Icing

- 8 tablespoons (1 stick or ½ cup) melted unsalted butter (113 grams)

- 4 oz (½ cup) heavy cream (118 milliliters)
- 3 cups powdered sugar, sifted (345 grams)
- 3-5 (depending on your preferred level of chocolaty taste) tablespoons cocoa powder (about 16 grams)
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract (15 grams)
- 1 tablespoon light corn syrup (15 milliliters)

Instructions

Cake

1. Preheat the oven to 375F.
2. Coat a half sheet pan (with a minimum one-inch lip) or jelly roll pan with nonstick spray.
3. Using a large mixing bowl, sift together the flour, sugar, cocoa powder, salt and baking soda.
4. Add melted butter, hot water (not boiling), and buttermilk to the dry ingredients and stir together just until incorporated and there are no lumps.
5. Next, add the eggs and vanilla to the mixture and stir until it just comes together, careful not to over mix since that can make the cake tough.
6. Add the mixture into your prepared sheet pan and bake at 375 F for 20-25 minutes, or until firm in the middle.
7. Allow the cake to cool for 10-15 minutes before adding the icing.

Icing

1. While the cake is cooling, using a large bowl and sift together the powdered sugar and cocoa powder to ensure there are no lumps.
2. Pour your melted butter and cream into the sugar/cocoa mixture and whisk until completely smooth.
3. Mix in the vanilla and corn syrup.
4. Pour the icing over the warm cake and allow to harden slightly. (If the icing hardens too much before pouring on the cake, warm in the microwave for 10 seconds at a time and stir until it's the right consistency again.)
5. Allow icing to harden.
6. Slice and enjoy.

Note: You can also sprinkle a desired amount of chopped pecans or walnuts over the top before the icing dries if you wish.

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Banana Bread with Turbinado Sugar Crust

Banana bread has long been a family favorite around my house, and the addition of the turbinado sugar baked onto the top makes it that much more special.

Ingredients

- 1 ¾ cups all-purpose flour (210 grams)
- 1 teaspoon baking soda (4.8 grams)
- ½ teaspoon salt (3 grams)
- ¼ cup softened unsalted butter (57 grams)
- ¼ cup vegetable oil (48 grams)
- cup granulated sugar (100 grams)
- ¼ cup packed brown sugar (45 grams)
- 2 large room temperature eggs
- 3 very ripe medium to large bananas, mashed (375 grams)
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract (5 milliliters)
- 1½ tablespoon turbinado sugar (for the top of bread) (22-23 grams)

Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 350 F.
2. Prepare a 9x5 inch loaf pan with nonstick spray. (I also like to additionally line the middle with parchment paper.) Set aside for

later.

3. Whisk together the flour, baking soda and salt in a medium sized bowl, then set aside for later use.
4. Using a stand or hand mixer with the whisk attachment, cream the softened butter, oil and sugars on medium speed for about 3 minutes or until the mixture lightens in color. Scrape the sides with a rubber scraper if necessary to ensure proper mixing.
5. Next, add the mashed bananas, eggs and vanilla to the sugar/butter/oil mixture and beat on medium speed about 30 seconds or until blended.
6. After that, add the dry ingredients to the batter and mix on low until combined (about 30 seconds). Do not overmix. If necessary, use a rubber scraper to incorporate any flour left on the sides of the bowl with the batter.
7. Add the batter to the prepared loaf pan and smooth with a rubber scraper to even out the top.
8. Sprinkle the top with turbinado sugar in a smooth layer.
9. Bake the bread at 350 °F for 55-60 minutes. The loaf is done when a toothpick or skewer inserted into the center comes out clean.
10. Remove the bread from the oven and allow it to rest inside the pan on a wire rack for about one hour before cutting. I do find it's easier to cut the longer the bread is allowed to cool.
11. Serve and enjoy.