

Witchified: Cesily's Grand Opening

By Wendy Kheiry

Chapter One

I grabbed up the press sheet from the front porch as soon as I heard it land. The delivery boy was riding his bike down the street singing and pointing his finger at each house as he passed. The bound sheets would fly from the bags attached to the back of his bike and land just one foot from the front door without fail. Jeremy Blagh...or Bloghu, or something like, that lived a few streets over and made a little pocket money from his route. I left him a tip every month and cookies for the holidays.

I pulled the sheets close to me as I wound past the stairs, through my plaster walled house, and crossed wooden floors marred by the scratches and faded spots left from the people who lived here before me. Unpacked boxes were piled in each room creating the maze from the front door to the kitchen, through an unlivable living room and a box-filled dining room. My black half skirt rustled lace against the boxes, and my black lace up boots clomped heartily

across the floors as I walked. White frilly blouse, purple corset, and a black laced short jacket were the best I could do with so much of my clothes still in random boxes to pull an outfit together. I'd pinned a small black top hat with a small violet flower to my swept-up hairstyle.

Once in the kitchen, I untied the ribbon and spread the front sheet across my kitchen table. I didn't find my announcement on the first one and began turning each sheet and scanning for the interview. There were photos of a diverted robbery of spells from the Incantations Bank, and a close-up photo of Mayor Belinda Wells, official tall hat perched over perfect curls, cutting the ribbon to a new cauldron factory west of town that had been the subject of tense discussions as to scope, location, and hiring practices within the community. Work had begun weeks ago widening the roads leading to and from the factory before it opened this week.

There were lists of sports and music and magic competitions and performances. Classified ads, comic drawings, and jobs available were next to properties and houses for sale. I couldn't find it though, and went through the whole set of sheets again, shaking each one as I turned it as if I could make it appear through agitation.

No one would know if they don't publish it, I thought. Maybe Jonie Templor hadn't gotten the date right. With that thought the office drawer flew open, and out came the correspondence we had exchanged via intercellular mail. Sometimes the magic in me happened unthinkingly especially when I was concentrating deeply. I skimmed the exchange and checked the date she'd given me with today's date, and they matched. They matched and there was no announcement.

I sat down in a kitchen chair and stretched my feet out in front of me. I missed Melvin, the orange cat with a swirled tabby pattern who had been with me all through my transformation,

the Witchification process, until he disappeared about a month ago. None of the finding spells I tried had located him, and I'd had to post fliers all around town asking for information as if I weren't the least bit Witchified, and honestly there was some debate about that, but I didn't like to dwell on it. Heartbroken, worried, and feeling abandoned, I'd had to finish the preparations for opening day without him.

Opening day for the shop wouldn't have the promised coverage in the sheets. I felt disappointed and tried to fight off a little bit of panic as it tried to grow larger and discombobulate me. There'd been plenty of lead time, and an interview, a photo session of me and the shop, a tour for the journalist and photographer, and I served them tea and scones in the den space allotted to snacks and drinks. Jonie had said that if it didn't make in today's sheets it wasn't going to make it into the sheets. She said that if it were a slow press cycle then I could count on it being there, but it might have to be cut if there weren't space, and would I care to arrange an advertisement just in case?

Only I couldn't really afford an advertisement. I had spent most of the lukas I had prepaying rent on the location for the year and filling the shop with the specialized and expensive inventory that would give the shop the niche I was trying to fill.

Gathering my things together for the day, missing Melvin, I blinked twice and cut the lights, walked out the door which opened for me and closed behind me as I approached and went through it. I put the planner, and maps, and accounting notebooks into the baskets on the back of my bicycle and headed off to the shop.

I stopped at Bristol Books and Beckonings, where I used to work, on the way to my shop. I spelled my bike to the bike stand out front and pushed through the wood and glass door setting

the chimes to chiming. Mr. Gaier came out from the back room to look at me over his reading glasses. He set down the clipboard and opened his arms to give me a brief hug.

“Ready for today then?” he asked, heading back around the counter to get me my morning coffee. The months I had spent working part-time for him had been joyous. Mr. Gaier had mentored me through many of the issues I would face when I finally opened my shop. As much as I was glad that the time had come to begin my own foray into business, I would miss being surrounded by the old books and Tawny, Mr. Gaier’s cat, who came up to me and began winding her long creamy furred body around my legs. I bent down to scratch behind her ears and give her the long petting she required before I could do anything else.

“Almost ready,” I told him.

“There was no announcement in today’s sheets.” I added, as I leaned on the wooden counter and began playing with the sparkling business cards and bookmarks by the register.

The coffee behind him began steaming as he glanced at me quite sternly before turning back to his contraption, part magic and part machine.

“Did you sign up for that magic workshop I told you about last week?”

“I forgot because I also didn’t have time,” I sighed. What good would it have done, I wondered, taking the hot ceramic mug he handed to me, just more money gone. I set the coffee down carefully on a little carpet and snapped my fingers to pull out some demi-lukas from my bag for the tip and to pay for the coffee and set the coins down on the counter.

“Cesily, if you can snap money like that without even an incantation, you can sky magic an announcement and find Melvin, if you really wanted to find him.” That look again. Mr. Gaier

always encouraged me to explore my magic since I'd never gone through the Settling which is the beginning of the Witchification process.

I sighed even more. I was feeling attacked and disgruntled. I had to open the shop today, didn't really know much about using my magic, and Melvin was gone. My house still wasn't unpacked, the work had been put off so much, as I was getting the shop ready for customers and protecting the inventory and making sure none of it would spoil, that I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to get settled into the house and call it home. Melvin up and disappeared without a by-your-leave, and today the shop was opening.

My mind was in a spiral of everything that was going wrong. I felt like I had very little left to give, and I needed to make some sales today, so I needed customers, but I didn't want Mr. Gaier to know how rough the past month had been, or how I'd put myself on scant food rations to save money in the lead-up to the opening.

"The magic workshop would have done you a world of good. Here," Mr. Gaier handed me a heavy book leather bound with gilt letters called 'Thriving Spellification' by Witmer James, the foremost authority on developing magical abilities through the canny use of spells and careful experimentation.

"Make the sky charm announcement. Then read through this while you're waiting for your first customers.

"You do want customers, don't you?"

I only nodded to him as I took the book. My throat had closed tight, and I attempted to swallow to clear my voice, but coughed a bit instead. Mr. Gaier had been a huge help throughout

the Witchification process, the shop planning, and teaching me about handling retail through the experiences in the bookstore.

Mr. Gaier believed my Witchification had come so late to me because of the ‘particulars of my upbringing,’ and the ‘struggle to find myself amongst the deceptions’ as he often said. There was more to it than he realized, but I’d only shared some of the details of that time in my life. He thought that workshops, witchy friends, and spell books would help me ‘unfasten the locks on my spirit.’

I jingled out through the door finally finding enough voice to call out a thank you over my shoulder followed by ‘See you later.’

Chapter Two

Leaving my bike parked in front of the shop, I crossed the street on foot half a block up Bleaker Street. There was my shop, the third entrance on Delvin Place from the corner. The entry way was arched and sunken in where the door opened into the shop. The window was large and clear with Herborium Works in large letters arranged in a slight curve and in smaller letters under that it said Rare Spells and Incantation Supplies. I thought this town would be a good market for a specialty shop like this, and today I would begin to find out if I was right or not.

Cavendeshlem, a small hamlet built on slow-hilled fertile fields, bustled this time of morning. Bicycle bells ringing out from two wheelers, three wheelers, and four wheelers made a counterpoint to the rumble of wheels on the cobblestones. All of the motorized vehicles were a mixture of pedaling and magic. Little pedal cars, and bigger trucks all biked down the wide or narrow streets in the day's fair weather. Cavendeshlem had a dry season and a rainy season, but never got extended heat or extended cold, and today the weather was bright, sunny, and cool with a hint of rain from the haze on the Eastern horizon. We were coming up on the wet season and could begin to get afternoon showers which would fall briefly then disappear.

The street was lined with short plump trees with flowers of purple, red, and yellow. Their rounded canopies cast dappled light onto the streets and buildings, and the leaves were small, and plentiful, resembling feathers as much as anything. Pedestrians chatted, nodded, and pushed their way past each other carrying baskets, umbrellas, and piles of books as they navigated the sidewalks. Some of the crowd were in their renaissance half dresses, or in puffy slacks cuffed midcalf, and some in sleek business wear, while the others wore a mix of tails and tall hats, smoking jackets and sweater vests, or flannels and denim.

I weaved and ducked through the stream of bustling people. At the door, I balanced my bag of books and notebooks, and my coffee, and pointed my two left fingers at the latch to unlock it. The lock sprang, the door opened, and inside I stepped as the lights lit and the curtains opened. The space in front of me held a small couch and two armchairs around a little coffee table, partially on an oval green rug that was placed on the hardwood floors.

The couch faced the front windows where cheery plants were hung and flowering in downward cascades above a deep blue cushioned window seat. A half table along the wall as I entered received my coffee and bag of books and materials while I tried to summon up the enthusiasm for this day.

Herborium Works: Rare Spells and Incantations Supplies would open in an hour. The shelves along the side wall opposite me were full of herbs, scrolls, inks, and papers for sale all of which were some of the most potent, and expensive, materials for use by spell casters. I had imported candles of rare waxes, and wicks of even more unusual sources like duck nest, unicorn fiber, and twisted molted goose feather vanes. Tucked in amongst the candles were spell-specific cauldrons, incense, and hard to find tarot decks. A small collection of apothecary supplies and large variety of herbs lined the shelves behind the counter where the register sat waiting for the first customers.

I took the gilt-lettered book from the satchel and put it on the coffee table with my coffee. I hung the satchel underneath the counter and grabbed a photo of Melvin that I'd magicked when he first found me on my way back to the couch.

I took the crystal pendant from around my neck and held it over the photo of Melvin. This particular crystal shimmered with a pale pink light and could be charged directionally to

help find a place or a thing, among its other various properties like shielding thoughts and dreams. I intended to see if I could find Melvin with it. Using yes and no questions I found that Melvin was still alive, which was a great relief, and that he had managed to get himself to an alternate world, and that he couldn't get back on his own. Luckily, now that I knew roughly where he had gone, oop...

“Meow...?” He didn't even look sorry when he appeared, just took a couple of steps and sat on his haunches. Squinting, in a somewhat smug fashion, I thought, he didn't seem to be holding a grudge that it had taken me so long to find him. Even though I still had some feelings about his disappearance to process, I got him a bowl of cat food and put it under the counter with some fresh water. Melvin would find it there when he was ready, I guessed.

I owed Mr. Gaier for that one, for sure. After trying various incantations which hadn't worked, I hadn't thought to try the raw magic, that's what Mr. Gaier called whenever he noticed I accomplished a magical task without a spell or incantation, to see if I could locate him that way. Now, the grand opening announcement in the sky. I thought and thought about the logo design and store emblem and, well, that should do it. I waved my hand with a flourish above my head.

When I stepped out of the front door and looked up, the enormous rotating logo and emblem circled by an 'Opening today at 11 AM,' and the address '343 W Delvin Pl' circled very close overhead, almost grazing the tops of the buildings. I raised it higher and higher until I felt it could be seen from fairly far away yet still be read clearly, set an internal timer for three hours after which it would dissipate, and went back inside to finish my coffee and get ready for the customers I hoped would begin arriving.

Melvin finished his breakfast and sat with me on the couch, or rather he crawled onto my legs purring and kneading in such a way that it was almost pleasant, but as soon as I relaxed a little bit, one or more claws would dig into my skin just enough to be uncomfortable. Images of his travels flitted in and out of my mind, a world full of canals with long narrow boats and fresh fish, and white cats with lavender eyes with manes not quite like tigers but who were larger than Mistress Barker's dog, Leon who was a Vespers Belnar Monk dog, a large shaggy mountain dog standing about hip high usually marked with grey to black fur speckle with white, and a sausage like food made from exotic meats and spices which had a slightly sedative effect on Melvin. I listened to his memories of chiming music, and wind flutes resonating both deeper and higher than our music with their unusual cadences, when the front door opened suddenly, scaring Melvin right off of my lap and causing me to leap to my feet spilling my coffee onto the lace tights on my right knee, down my right calf, and onto my right boot.

I looked up appalled at the man who stood in the doorway. He chuckled, and his long brown beard quivered with humor. He wore a black top hat, and black tails with silvery grey trim at the edges. The jacket came down in front a little longer than the trending style and was buttoned over a shirt so darkly black it made the black hat and jacket appear more like charcoal. I looked up at his eyes, which were a startling green, and smiled.

“Welcome!” I told him, but it wasn't quite as friendly and cheerful as it could have been.

Snapping a cloth into my hand, I began wiping up the coffee I spilled, propping my foot up on the coffee table and bending over to get at my boot. What a mess, I thought, as I dabbed the cloth up my leg, then I heard him clear his voice. I looked up again.

“How can I help you today, sir?” I asked looking back down at my leg and dabbing a little more. That just about did it.

Melvin watched us both intently from the counter, and I caught him throwing a glimpse of a lavender eyed beauty from the alternative world at me with what I thought was a knowing chuckle. I straightened with a growing flush to my face and snapped my fingers again, and the rag disappeared. The man had taken one step into the store and once more cleared his voice. My nerves jangled and I looked at him and waited for him to speak.

“Are you the, uhm, witch who has placed the, er, the advertisement up in the clouds this morning?”

“Yes!

“I’d never done one before. Do you think it came out all right?” I asked picking up my coffee and books off of the low table in front of the couch. I began to move behind the counter, and he took a few more steps towards me as I moved away from both the door and the seating, and regrettably from himself for I liked the shape of him.

“It’s just that...” he looked at me then at his shoes, beautiful black boots of scrolled mushroom leather with pointy toes, then back up at me.

I shrugged a shoulder and raised an eyebrow.

“It’s just that what?”

“Well, madam witch,” he paused briefly as if he wanted my name, then as if he changed his mind, and finally the rest of his words rushed out in a flood,

“todoapublicworkinglikethatyouneedacitypermit. Do you have a copy of your permit nearby?”

My eyes squinted as I tried to follow what he was saying, than they went wide as I shook my head and leaned back once I understood what he was asking me.

Chapter Three

“How much for a permit?” I asked.

“Well, madam, the permit is 200 lukas, and the fine will be another 80 lukas.” By now the madam this and madam that had started to annoy me, and the amount of the cost of the permit appalled me.

Right away the cheap and frugal part of me went to battle with the obey-the-rules part of me. That conflict was quickly followed by the anti-authoritarian part of me jumping into the fray which woke up survival me, and I’m afraid I stood there scowling at him while this raging argument tumbled furniture and broke things in my mind.

“What if I took it down right now? Would I still owe anything? I didn’t know about needing a permit.” Find-the-loophole-me sauntered into the situation carelessly throwing down the obvious easiest possible solution, while dodging the metaphorical plates and chairs the others were still slinging around in my mind. Find-the-loophole-me tried to come up with other exits against the background tussle while I blinked, perhaps somewhat fetchingly I thought, at the government man.

He came over to the counter where I had set down my coffee. I piled my books onto a shelf under the counter and straightened back up to see him pulling on his beard. There were crinkles around his eyes which seemed to dance merrily in his face, and he had a crooked bit of a smile which made me feel awfully strange in a nice way when he turned it my direction, like he was doing while I stood there fiddling with my coffee and waiting for his answer.

I smiled back at him. He shook his head and his smile dropped away, which was disappointing. He cleared his throat again and shook his head some more.

“I’m afraid not, there’s already been a complaint, and I’m afraid you’ll have to settle up with me or come down to the office.”

My eyes lit up and I smiled again leaning forward over the counter towards him, glancing swiftly left and right, and whispering loudly, “What happens if I go down to the office with you?” I met his eyes and lifted an eyebrow.

He took a step back and cocked his head to one side. His eyes glanced at the ceiling, and he stroked his beard, and he said, “Uhm, honestly, this is my second week on the job since my training ended, and I have no idea. Hold on up while I find out.”

He pulled out a pocket mirror communicator and flipped it opened, wrote in something quickly by just pointing his finger here and there in front of it and waited by looking around the shop at things on the shelves to the side, behind me, at everything it seemed except me. I’d posed rather attractively while he looked around the shop, so he could have at least seen me standing there. I moved abruptly to examine the spells around the register, too impatient and careless to hold an attractive pose for an uninterested government man, no matter cute his eyes and beard and smile were.

A gentle beep sounded, and he looked back down at the mirror again nodding. “Okaaay. Right. Okay. Suuure. Right. Will do. Thanks.” He snapped it shut.

“Uh, you just pay the fine there, and they warn you not to do that again.”

“What if I don’t pay it?” I whispered even more loudly, exaggerating my voice to give all the parts of me a chance to calm down and figure something out that could fix this. Tilting my head at him as a big question mark, I turned back to the shelves so he couldn’t see in my eyes that I didn’t quite have the amount of lucas on me that would pay for the permit and the fine.

The door jangled again, and a couple walked into the store. I gave the government man a stern look with a questioning brow, and he nodded and wandered over towards the shelves while I greeted the couple with a hearty hello, welcome, come right on in, and a what can I do for you today to cover up the tension between the government man and myself.

“Good morning, dear,” said the slender lady who entered the shop first.

She was tall and elegant with silvery hair swooped up under a maroon hat trimmed in cream lace. She met my gaze, and her eyes felt shrewd, but kind. Her corset matched the hat, and the low-heeled shoes while the skirt flared down in cascading ruffled tiers which were modestly gathered up to the knee on her right side. I’d seen a similar skirt in the store front a couple of entrances up from mine, they might have been made of gold filaments for the cost.

She carried a smart looking walking cane of smooth dark wood which she tapped out a rhythm on the floor as she walked. I was near to bursting with curiosity as to who she was, and what she might want to purchase. She smiled and looked around the shop with bright eyes and glanced over her shoulders at the man who came in behind her.

“Darling Charles, do look, would you, at the selections on the wall?” She strode over to where the government man was doing his best to look interested in the merchandise. For a moment it looked like she would walk right into the government man, but he moved smoothly to the side as if something else had caught his attention, but I suspected he just picked up something randomly in order for his movements to seem independent from the way she strode into the space he just vacated.

Darling Charles, who was a tall thin man clad sedately in grey trousers with a grey blazer and who had followed the lady into the store a few minutes after her, leaned on his black cane

with both hands and peered straight at me over the top of his glasses rather than allowing his gaze to wander over to the selection of goods.

“How can I help you today?” I asked remembering my shop manners from having worked at Mr. Gaier’s bookstore.

The man nodded as if in approval, or as if I passed some sort of test, or as if he made up his mind about something, and picked up his cane in one hand then sort of waltz-walked over to stand just behind the lady who gave me the answer.

“I can’t help wondering, my dear, if you’d have any Lividum Astreus? Sometimes known as...”

“Yes, I do! It’s also known as David’s Blue Ear. I have it by powder, or by dried ear. But if you need a tincture or decoction made from it, I offer that service as well.” My words rushed out with excitement, enthusiasm, and at least a pinch of glee, as I began to really believe my shop might become a magical supplies resource. I had turned to locate the containers on the shelf behind me, so I heard and felt rather than saw a shift in the room, a silence, a quiet tension made by the lack of breathing, an intense feeling as I get when I feel someone staring at me, the heavy eyes feeling, before I turned all the way back around to face them.

Chapter Four

The couple had moved up to the counter, and the government man had managed to make his way over to the front window, but all three were staring at me mouths sort of round with wonder. They were holding their breath and their eyes did weigh at me, which was a good thing probably, I thought, as I floated down to the ground. Maybe not that many people could levitate up to the higher shelves like that. I flushed and felt flustered and almost dropped the items I'd taken from the shelves.

This levitating when excited or anxious had begun after the Witchification process, and it always caused some comment and questions. No one could explain the why of it, and I was left to learn to deal with it on my own, like a lot of things when it came to magic.

The lady and gentleman exchanged looks, but I don't know what they were signifying to each other. With the customers in front of me and tasks at hand, I kept from looking directly at the government man, but from my peripheral vision, I couldn't help but notice he'd made his way back over to the product shelves, lingering over the collection of rare books.

To cover my confusion and self-consciousness about the levitating, and to get these customers served, I held a ceramic container of powder and a larger tin of the dried ears out towards them a little then set them on the counter.

"Would you like to inspect the dried ears or test the powder?" I asked feeling fidgety with my feet not consistently being in contact with the ground, and this seemed like a bad time to lose control of gravity. I pointed at my feet and stuck them to the floor by activating the emergency shoe gum that I'd developed for situations like this. I could layer a film across the soles of my

shoes weekly, and then when I bespelled it as needed, they would sort of hold onto the surface of the floor as long as I wasn't too anxious or excited.

The lady gave a small smile to the gentleman and approached the counter. I opened the tin and slid it towards her. She peered into it keeping her hands behind her back as she looked. At this point, I was glad for all of the time I'd spent reading about the protocols for selling magical objects, items, and materials. There were three main books about the protocols, and each book had some small differences based on location and type of sales, like if I were selling from a cart or in an outside booth all the rules were modified, and then there were regional nuances, but mostly the books agreed on the major points, and I had tried to memorize where they differed for the smaller details.

This is why they kept their hands back from the product, and why I was displaying the goods just so. Now would come their inspection of the product, then an offer by me to give them a demonstration of magical potency (to avoid getting cheated with something that looked right, but wouldn't actually work), after that the haggling over the amount of product and the cost, although this tended to be less in the shops and more in the outside booths, and then the exchange of goods for lucas.

From under the counter, I pulled a small pair of tongs, a small porcelain bowl, and a small wooden spoon and laid them on the counter next to the ceramic jar.

"May I?" She asked gesturing at the tongs.

"Of course," I said, handing her the tongs handle first so that she could bring the items closer without touching them with anything that belonged to her, or with any part of her body in order to avoid contamination, deliberate or accidental. The stories of magical shopkeepers

sabotaging each other were all through the books about protocols, and which story led to what protocol made for a somewhat chilling read, but luckily the protocols were instituted by common agreement to protect the lives of shopkeepers and their customers.

I glanced at the government man to see if he meant to drag me off to jail or demand my fees and fines any time soon, but he had picked up the second edition copy of Smerg's Medicinal Incantors, which I had spent 3 years tracking down. A shot of worry wormed its way up my back as the book's worth was about an eighth of my entire inventory's value, and he was casually leafing through it. Each page turned just a little faster than I would have liked, but he wasn't being careless with it. I rather hoped he wasn't a thief. I knew the government jobs didn't pay too well until year five and resolved to keep a firm eye on him.

The gentleman had approached the lady and they murmured quietly head-to-head while she turned over the one ear, then the next, and the two towards the bottom of the tin with the tongs I had provided. I brought my eyes back to them, and wondered how they would react to the demonstration.

"Very nice, young lady," said the gentleman. His voice boomed into the silence that had settled on the shop and seemed to linger in the air with a resonance which made the volume seem louder than it might. I felt like shaking the sound off of me as if it were water, but also that it might be rude somehow to do so, and I stayed as still as I could.

"Quite," said the lady, "Would you prepare the test, please?" She looked directly at me then. For a moment, I was pinned to the spot in her grey eyes. In my mind, I felt a delving begin, an intrusion of curiosity and something bright and sharp poking into my thoughts so I closed-the-blinds-blinked to slam her out of my thoughts and out of my head and reached for the wooden

spoon as if nothing had happened. The couple exchanged another look, but I wasn't interested in their covert glance conversation at this point because I was upset at the trespassing attempt of my mind.

Chapter Five

I spooned a bit of the powder into the bowl and slid the bowl towards the lady. I met her glance and could feel my chin jut up and out a bit, daring her to try to delve me again without my permission, which was very bad form for knowledgeable and classy witches and warlocks such as they appeared to be. Not just shop protocols, but general magic protocols do not allow for delving without permission, and in fact it is against the law. Since she hadn't actually succeeded, I wasn't sure if there had really been a crime.

When she giggled, I felt myself begin to flush and tremor. I couldn't ask them to leave because I needed the sale to pay the government man, if he was who he said he was. That thought sent my mind down some interesting paths, so I sent a message to Mr. Gaier with Melvin who left and returned swiftly. The response surprised me, and I disintegrated the note he'd sent back to me with a quick furrow-browed glance at the government man.

On the counter in front of me, a sparkle of smoke rose up from the bowl. The curling stream of stardust, periwinkle blue, ascended in tiny, long curls, which began to widen and shorten. The lady and gentleman gasp and stood back as the sparkles grew brighter and cast flecks of light out of the smoke in all directions. I think one landed in my hair and I was grateful they weren't hot as well as bright.

The government man snapped the book shut, to my dismay, and placed it back on the shelf striding over to the counter in small, determined steps. I could feel his gazing taking in the couple, the items on the counter, and oh, he looked at me pretty intently, and I wondered if the smoke and sparkles startled him.

“Yes. A pinch of the powder, my dear. Can you seal it into a container I provide?” The lady sounded triumphant and nodded sharply to the gentleman who stood up straight, puffed out his chest, and tapped his cane on the floor before a sudden grin appeared on his face.

“Yes, ma’am. I can do that.” I told her. The gentleman provided me an envelope container made of bark with a patch of thin red woven cloth, and I blinked the amount of David’s Blue Ear into it. The design on the rug seemed to be slowly drifting across the surface. I showed them inside the container where I had put the product, then sealed it generically so that anyone could open it, but it would not dampen nor spoil.

“My name is Agathatte Barnslow, and this is Major Charles Drunnin Barnslow,” the lady told me. Her laugh lines danced across her face, and her grey eyes seemed to nod at me though she held her head still while she spoke. “My dear, you’ve made us very happy today. What do we owe you, and pray tell, what do we call you?” The lady smiled gently at me before fading back into seriousness.

Now that the demonstration was completed to their satisfaction and the purchase was about to close, I felt better about not challenging them on the delving. After all, I had just moved here, and the store is new, perhaps they wanted to try to be sure I wasn’t going to cheat them, which doesn’t justify what they did, but could maybe explain why they might try.

Snapping and waving, I sealed up the product on the counter and whisked it back onto the shelves without looking behind me. By their faces I could see that I was maybe ‘making a spectacle of myself’ as Dinah, the hostler from Derbiford who sort of raised me with her partner Draken, used to tell me, but it was my shop, my show, and my time I was saving. I tapped into my register, then made a single tally, then another for the sealing spell. Tradition dictates that

most customers will seal their own containers, but since I sealed theirs I had to charge for that as well.

“That will be 800 lucas,” I said. An internal jubilation began to lift my stuck shoes off of the floor, so I jabbed my finger at the ground to increase the weight of my shoes and that brought my feet back into contact with the floor to my relief.

They counted out the lucas onto the counter, some from a small bag tied to her waist, and some from a pocket inside of his jacket.

As protocol dictated, I waved my hand over the eight shiny lucas and two of them turned to dust, so there was a pause while they reached into another small pouch she had at her wrist and placed two more on the counter. I waved my hand over them, and they remained as they were, but then I pointed quickly at the whole pile with my pinky finger and another one turned to dust.

The lady tsk-tsked while she tapped her cane on her shoe, then reached down briefly before raising her hand and placing a final one, a double weight lucas, on the counter in front of me. I waved over it, then pointed, then called Melvin who jumped onto the counter and sniffed in the direction of the coins. He jumped down again and sent me the idea that he was satisfied his dinners would continue, and I scooped up the coins and placed them in my coin drawer. Sale completed.

“My name is Cesily Franklindt. A pleasure doing business with you.” I nodded in a way that was almost a slight bow and smiled at them.

I was pleased that they had thought so highly of me as to test my magic and try to cheat me several times. The bonus when I caught that last sneaky fake luca made any lingering doubts

about them, not quite vanish, but definitely calmed a lot of the tension I had been holding about it. I couldn't wait to tell Mr. Gaier about these two! I had not forgotten the delving attempt and resolved to ask him about that as well in case there was something about delving manners I had missed in my studies about magical etiquette.

“Good afternoon, Cesily,” Mr. Barnslow said and touched the brim of his hat before turning to the door.

“We do look forward to visiting again. A charming place you have, my dear. See you soon.” The lady Barnslow winked at me and smiled broadly as she fairly danced out of the door after him.

Chapter Six

The government man watched them go, inhaled long and deeply, and exhaled heavily. He approached the counter. I noted how he flicked his eyes to one side than the other, not quite bringing them up to meet mine which were watching him steadily. He fidgeted with his jacket and cleared his throat.

“About the fees and fine, madam...?” He began, but trailed off and would not meet my eyes however I tilted my head or moved to try to catch his gaze, but now I knew why.

“If you could just show me some identification that would confirm your position with the government, then I would be happy to oblige you, mister...?” pausing to give him room to fill me in on his name, I pointed at my feet to lighten my shoes and get rid of the gum sticking to the floor in case I needed to move quickly away from him because in front of me was a government imposter and I’d managed to alert the proper authorities who were on their way to my shop just now.

Mr. Gaier had written to ask for the identification and given me the incantation code for the government FineSetters.

“Douglas Tradoner, the third, madam.” He said meeting my eyes at last. I saw some sorrow there with a smidgen of apology, but I steeled myself in case he tried something dastardly. Looking into his eyes still gave me that warm strange feeling, but the deed was done. His deed, my deed, all the deeds were finished, and he wasn’t reaching for identification as much as shuffling away from me towards the door while keeping his eyes on mine. The fluttery feelings when I looked at him trembled, and a sadness came over me that I couldn’t explain to myself and just had to accept.

The door chimed open and three FineSetters arrived in their blue uniforms. There was a broad one with large humped up shoulders and two long halves of a dark brown mustache dangling down on either side of his chin. His nose jutted out a bit than turned downward and his brows were thick boned and bushy. I noticed how he stood in the doorway blocking the exit.

The next one was shorter and skinny, like his body was waiting to grow, with his limbs long and awkward. His face was pale like cream with eyes that seemed too wide and tilted at slightly different angles from each other, but it was hard to tell as they were partially covered in blonde silky hair. I watched him marionette over to the space in front of the window.

The third one, who seemed bland with almost-brown hair, symmetrical but indistinct features, and lackluster everything, had taken about five steps into the shop and blew a whistle, shrill and unending.

I clapped my hands over my ears as pain reverberated in my skull and I think my bones were beginning to crack by the time the shorter blonde one with noticeable ears turned to me mouth open and shouted, "Leave off the whistle, man, she can hear it!"

The dull man stopped blowing the whistle and the other two stared at me and then they all began to mutter to each other.

"No, I never met anyone who could."

"Well, did she cancel the spell, do you think?"

"I can't hear anything, can you?"

They shook their heads at one another as they clustered together with their back towards me shot suspicious glances at me over their shoulders, then they turned to Douglan, who stood

stock-still near the counter with just his eyes moving from me then back to the FineSetters and getting wider as they roved around the room. I wondered what the whistle did. Had it frozen Douglan? Would it have frozen me if I hadn't heard it, or could the blower of the whistle guide the spell?

They crowded around Douglan, who was not a government man, and they were sort of jostling each other, and asking me about fines and fees, and what was his name, and I told them everything. They nodded to me and prodded him about the back and shoulders with short stubby wands that were almost clubs.

“If he needed money,” I asked, “What good does it do to set him a fee then?”

“Oh, well when he can't pay it, he goes to work for the government.”

“But he's a thief.”

They all just laughed and laughed at that, jostling each other with their elbows, pointing thumbs at me while they shook their heads and slapped their thighs, and I didn't understand why.

They took Douglan and left, just sort of surrounded him, chanted, and then they all four disappeared right out of my shop. I had a few more sales that day and closed up the shop feeling satisfied and that I would be able to begin paying my bills soon and stop raiding from my dwindling savings. Maybe this shop would work out for me. Maybe I could get my debts paid down eventually.

I stopped in quick to see Mr. Gaier and tell him about my day. When I told him about the Barnslows coming into the shop, he said the Barnslows were the very best of witches and warlocks and seemed pleased that they tested me so strongly. Although he did seem puzzled

about the attempted delving and added that they should know better as it really was a terrible breach of manners. I could tell from the way he gazed off into the distance that he would be puzzling about this discrepancy until his interest faded or he found a plausible theory he could test.

He laughed when I told him about levitating out of nervousness, and again when I told him Douglan would end up working for the government even though he's a rotten thief. When I asked why, he just chuckled and patted me on the shoulder.

"You'll figure it out," he assured me.

"Cesily, it sounds like your shop is going to do very well here. With satisfied customers like the Barnslows to spread the word, you'll have regular customers in no time. Get yourself some dinner, then get some rest, and I'll see you tomorrow. Oh, and it was good to see Melvin again, where had he gone off to?"

"Oh, I found him in another place, a world sort of like ours but not quite. The cats there are the size of Leon, Mistress Barker's dog. See you tomorrow, Mr. Gaier! Thank you for everything." I got on my bike and peddled home.