



Barbells, Broomsticks & A Baby (Evershift Haven #8)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I, Grizelda Greenwarth, am a powerful witch, nearly 141 years old, nine months pregnant, and entirely out of patience—with my stubborn baby, my surging magic, and especially my mother.

Life in Evershift Haven should be peaceful as I await the birth of my overdue child with Atlas Mountainheart, my mountain troll husband of five years, philosopher-turned-gym-owner, and relentless optimist, but when my mother, Brunelda, shows up uninvited with her judgments and cauldron of passive-aggression, the town's tranquility vanishes like a poorly grounded potion. She disapproves of our home, my marriage, and the fact that my unborn child refuses to reveal its gender via any magical means.

As my magic grows more unpredictable with each overdue day—summoning chocolate milk fountains and levitating dumbbells—Atlas does his best to charm my mother, who is immune to both protein shakes and Plato. Between a disastrous “witcher wellness workshop,” an accidental nesting spell that floods the town with baby gear, and the world's most dramatic labor, I'm trying to keep it together without turning anyone into a hedgehog.

Welcome back one final time to Evershift Haven, where magic is seasonal, motherhood is unpredictable, and love comes with a dash of sparkles and squat racks. Barbells Broomsticks is the cozy, whimsical, heart-filled finale to a series where even the most magical chaos can't outshine the glow of finding exactly where you belong.

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Ten Years Ago

I ADJUST MY PURPLE cloak with a huff and stare at the glass doors of Fae Fitness. The sign features a muscular troll lifting weights that appear to be made of glowing crystals. How gaudy.

“You can do this, Grizelda,” I mutter to myself, reaching for the door handle.

I need a potion ingredient—sweat from a mountain troll—for a particularly finicky fertility spell. It’s not something I normally stock in my apothecary, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to order it from that insufferable Herbert at Magical Essences two pocket universes over. Hence, my reluctant visit to the only gym in Evershift Haven.

The moment I step inside, I’m assaulted by the scent of eucalyptus and something earthy—not entirely unpleasant, but definitely foreign to my herb-and-incense accustomed nostrils. The space is surprisingly bright, with high ceilings and large windows that let in natural light. Various supernatural beings are engaged in different activities. A pair of dryads are bending impossibly backward on yoga mats, a vampire is doing one-handed pushups, and a mermaid in a special hovering water bubble is doing core exercises.

“Welcome to Fae Fitness.” A deep, rumbling voice greets me.

I turn to find what is perhaps the largest mountain troll I’ve ever encountered approaching me. At least seven feet tall, with skin the color of granite and eyes like polished amber. His bald head bears a few patches of moss—quite common for

mountain trolls—though I notice his are arranged in a pattern that almost resembles a stylish haircut.

“Can I help you find anything?” he asks, and I’m momentarily taken aback by how articulate he is. Trolls aren’t typically known for their eloquence.

“I’m looking for the owner,” I say primly, straightening my spine to appear taller, though it’s a futile effort.

“You’ve found him.” He smiles, revealing teeth that are surprisingly white and straight for a troll. “Atlas Mountainheart, at your service.” He extends a massive hand. “And you are?”

“Grizelda Greenwarth,” I say, reluctantly placing my hand in his. His grip is gentle despite his obvious strength. “I own the Enchanted Emporium on Main Street.”

“The witch shop.” His eyes light up with recognition. “I’ve been meaning to stop by. I hear you make an excellent joint repair potion. Many of my older clients could benefit from that.”

“It’s not a ‘witch shop,’” I correct him with a sniff. “It’s an apothecary specializing in magical remedies and enchanted solutions for everyday problems, and it’s also a general mercantile.”

“Of course.” He nods seriously, though there’s a twinkle in his eye that suggests he’s amused by my prickliness. “How can I help you today?”

I clear my throat, suddenly finding this more awkward than anticipated. “I require a particular ingredient for a potion I’m brewing. Specifically, I need...” I lower my voice, glancing around to ensure no one is eavesdropping, “...sweat from a mountain troll.”

Rather than being offended, Atlas throws back his head and laughs, a sound like boulders tumbling down a mountainside. Several small flowers bloom spontaneously in the moss on his head.

“That’s a first,” he says when his laughter subsides. “Usually people come here wanting to sweat, not collect it.”

My cheeks burn with embarrassment. “It’s for a legitimate magical purpose.”

“I’m sure it is.” He nods, still grinning. “And I’d be happy to help, but I’m curious—what kind of potion requires troll sweat?”

“That’s private,” I snap, then immediately regret my tone. I need his cooperation, after all. “It’s a fertility potion,” I say reluctantly. “Mountain troll sweat has unique properties that enhance certain aspects of the brew.”

“Fertility, hmm?” His eyebrows rise, and those amber eyes assess me with unexpected intelligence. “Planning on starting a family, Ms. Greenwarth?”

“Not for myself.” I’m horrified at the assumption. “It’s for a client. I am a professional.”

“Of course.” He holds up his hands in apology, but that infuriating twinkle remains in his eyes. “You’re in luck. I’m about to start my afternoon workout. You’re welcome to...collect what you need.” He gestures to the training area.

I follow him to a section of the gym equipped with weights that would be impossible for most beings to lift. He removes his shirt with casual ease, revealing a torso carved from what appears to be living stone, covered with intricate patterns like rivers flowing over a rocky landscape.

I swallow hard and avert my gaze, focusing instead on retrieving a small crystal vial from my cloak pocket.

“So,” he says, lifting a barbell that must weigh several hundred pounds, “Do you often go around collecting bodily fluids from strangers, or am I special?”

“I assure you, Mr. Mountainheart, there is nothing special about this interaction,” I say coolly, though my gaze betrays me by wandering back to the impressive display of muscles working beneath his stone skin.

“Atlas, please. Mr. Mountainheart was my father, and he was much larger and grumpier than I am.”

“Hard to imagine,” I mutter.

He laughs again, and I fight a smile. There’s something infectious about his good humor.

“May I call you Zelda?”

“No one calls me Zelda,” I say with a hint of reproof.

He just grins before saying the name again. “Zelda... It suits you better. Less formal.”

“I am extremely formal,” I say with all my dignity.

“Hmm.” He eyes me thoughtfully while continuing his repetitions with the massive barbell. “I don’t think so. I think underneath that purple cloak and stern expression, there’s someone who appreciates the spontaneity of life. Like magic itself—structured but ultimately wild and unpredictable.”

I'm startled by this assessment. "What do you know about magic?"

"I know about many things," he says with a shrug that makes the muscles in his shoulders ripple like tectonic plates shifting. "As Aristotle said, 'The more you know, the more you realize you don't know.'"

"You're quoting Aristotle?" I can't keep the surprise from my voice.

"Is that so shocking?" He grins. "Because I'm a troll, I must be intellectually stunted?"

"No, I—" I stumble over my words, genuinely flustered. "I apologize for the assumption."

"No offense taken." He sets down the barbell and picks up a towel, wiping his brow where beads of moisture have formed. "Here, for your potion." He offers me the towel.

I wrinkle my nose. "That's not quite how I collect the ingredient."

"No? How then?"

I approach cautiously, vial in hand. "I need to gather it directly." I feel more awkward by the second.

"By all means." He leans down slightly, bringing his face closer to my level.

With a steady hand that belies my inner discomfort, I uncork the vial and gently press it to his temple, where a droplet of sweat is making its way down the curve of his stony skin. The crystal vial glows slightly as it collects the essence.

“Tickles,” he murmurs, his voice surprisingly soft for such a large being.

Our eyes meet, and for a moment, I forget why I came here. There’s an unexpected depth in his amber gaze, a wisdom that contradicts every preconception I’ve held about trolls. Something flutters in my stomach—a sensation I quickly attribute to magical recognition. Trolls do have inherent earth magic, after all. That’s all this is—a magical resonance.

I step back quickly, corking the vial. “Thank you. This will be sufficient.”

“Happy to help,” he replies, watching me with that same amused expression. “You know, we offer magical fitness classes on Thursdays. Spellcasting requires significant core strength and mental focus. You might enjoy it.”

“I doubt that very much,” I say, tucking the vial safely into my cloak. “My magical abilities are quite refined, thank you.”

“I’m sure they are.” He nods respectfully. “But even the most skilled witch can benefit from cross-training. Magic and physical wellness are more connected than most people realize.”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” I say dismissively, though part of me is intrigued by the concept.

“Please do.” He picks up his shirt but doesn’t put it back on. “Feel free to come back if you need any more...ingredients.”

My cheeks flush as I turn toward the exit. “Goodbye, Mr. Mountainheart.”

“Atlas, and goodbye, Zelda... Until our paths cross again.”

“They won’t.” I hurry toward the door.

“As Heraclitus said, ‘No man ever steps in the same river twice,’” he calls after me.
“But I think we might be the exception to that rule.”

As I step back out into the afternoon sunlight, I clutch the vial of troll sweat in my pocket and try to ignore the fluttering sensation in my stomach. It’s just magical resonance, I tell myself firmly. Nothing more.

As I walk back to my shop, I find myself wondering what other philosophers Atlas Mountainheart might quote, and what other surprises might be hidden beneath that rocky exterior.

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I WAKE TO A SHARP KICK against my ribs and wince. My little one is getting stronger by the day, and more impatient too—like mother, like child, I suppose. Beside me, Atlas snores softly, the moss on his head sprouting tiny white flowers in his sleep.

Nine months of growing this magical being inside me, and I'm more than ready to meet them despite their stubborn insistence on hiding their gender. I place my hand on my enormous belly and smile despite my discomfort. At my age of one hundred and forty, most witches are done having children or never will have them. The pregnancy wasn't planned, resulting from a backfired fertility potion intended for a client that somehow affected me instead, but it's become the most wonderful accident of my life.

A sudden cramp seizes my lower back, and I shift uncomfortably. These Braxton Hicks contractions have been teasing me for weeks now. The baby is already a week past the due date, and my patience is wearing thin.

"You okay?" Atlas blinks open his eyes.

"Your child is practicing kickboxing on my internal organs," I grumble, but there's no real annoyance in my voice.

He places his large hand on my belly and immediately, the baby calms. It's almost infuriating how he or she always settles for him. We won't know the gender until its birth. Not because I haven't tried to determine it, but because he or she refuses to reveal that information to me.

“Good morning, little mountain,” he whispers to my belly. “Be gentle with your mother. As Kahlil Gibran said, ‘Tenderness and kindness are not signs of weakness and despair but manifestations of strength and resolution.’”

I roll my eyes. “It’s too early for philosophy.”

Atlas chuckles and kisses my forehead. “Never too early to impart wisdom to our child.”

The peaceful moment is shattered by a sharp rapping at our front door.

“Who could that be at this hour?” I frown, checking the enchanted clock beside our bed. It’s barely seven a.m.

Atlas rises. “I’ll check.”

As he leaves, I struggle to haul myself into a sitting position. Everything is more difficult these days, from getting out of bed to casting simple spells. My magic has been unpredictable throughout the pregnancy—sometimes magnified to dangerous levels, and other times, frustratingly unresponsive.

I hear voices downstairs—Atlas’s deep rumble and another voice, feminine and hauntingly familiar. I shudder. “No, it can’t be.” I waddle to the window and peer out, confirming my worst fears. A broomstick is parked neatly beside our front gate, adorned with purple ribbons and a bumper sticker that reads “My Other Ride is a Manticore.”

My mother is here.

Panic propels me into action. I throw on a robe over my nightgown and attempt to tame my wild hair with my fingers. With a desperate wave, I try to cast a quick

freshening charm, but my magic misfires, causing a small rain cloud to form above my head.

“Perfect.” I duck away from the localized downpour. This is exactly how I want to greet my mother. Pregnant, disheveled, and partially drenched.

I descend the stairs as quickly as my condition allows, dispelling the rain cloud with an irritated flick of my wrist. Brunelda Greenwarth, in all her intimidating glory, is in our living room. Tall, rail-thin, and with silver-streaked black hair pulled into a severe bun. Her traditional witch’s robe is immaculately pressed, and her posture is as rigid as a broomstick.

“Mother. What an...unexpected visit.”

Her critical gaze sweeps over me, taking in my swollen form, damp hair, and the puddle of rainwater at my feet. “Grizelda, I see your magical control is as lacking as ever.”

I grit my teeth. “Good morning to you too. What brings you here?”

“Can’t a mother visit her daughter before she gives birth? Especially when said daughter failed to inform her mother of the pregnancy until the fifth month?”

Guilt pricks at me, but I stand my ground. “It was a complicated situation.”

“So I gathered from your letters.” Her gaze shifts to Atlas, who is hovering awkwardly near the kitchen doorway. “Atlas. Still wearing those ridiculous flowered moss patches, I see.”

He doesn’t even blink or point out they’re part of him. “Good to see you again, Ms. Greenwarth. It’s been a while since the wedding.”

“Five years.” She frowns at him. “You clearly haven’t convinced my daughter to take proper prenatal potions. She looks positively exhausted.”

“I’ve been taking excellent care of myself,” I say, “And Atlas has been wonderful.”

“Hmm. I’ve brought my special pregnancy support kit. Your aunt Imogene swore by it when she was carrying triplets.”

As she retrieves a large velvet pouch from her carpet bag, Atlas catches my eye and gives me a supportive wink. Despite the tension radiating from my mother, his calm presence helps steady my nerves. “Thank you, Mother. That’s thoughtful.”

“It’s practical. I assume you have the guest room prepared?”

“Prepared?” I echo. “I didn’t know you were coming.”

“I sent an astral projection last week informing you of my visit.”

I rack my brain, trying to remember. “Mother, did you perhaps project to my shop instead of my home? I haven’t been working much these last few weeks.”

She purses her lips. “I may have confused the locations. Regardless, I’m here now, and clearly, you need my help. Look at you. Your magical aura is chaotic, your home is...” She glances around with barely concealed disdain, “Charmingly rustic, and you’re past your due date with no signs of labor.”

As if on cue, another false contraction grips me. I wince and place a hand on my lower back.

“Are you having contractions?” she asks.

“Just Braxton Hicks. They’ve been happening for weeks.”

Atlas returns with a tray of tea and biscuits. “The guest room is ready. I keep it prepared for any visiting family.”

I shoot him a surprised look. When did he have time to get the guest room ready? We definitely don’t keep it in a state of readiness.

He winks at me and whispers from the side of his mouth, “Super speed. Useful for more than just lifting heavy things.”

Despite my growing anxiety about my mother’s visit, I smile at him. Always prepared and thoughtful.

“So, Ms. Greenwarth, how long will you be staying with us?”

“Until the baby arrives and Grizelda is settled. No more than a month, I should think.”

I nearly choke on my tea. “A month?”

“Unless you plan to remain pregnant indefinitely. Which, given your stubbornness, wouldn’t surprise me entirely.”

Atlas seems completely unaffected by my mother’s bombshell. “The baby will come when they’re ready. As Lao Tzu said, ‘Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished.’”

My mother stares at him, clearly taken aback by the philosophical reference. “You still quote those dusty philosophers, I see. At your wedding reception, you compared marriage to Plato’s cave allegory. Most inappropriate.”

“I thought it was rather apt. Emerging from darkness into the light of shared truth and beauty.”

“It was a wedding, not a philosophy seminar.” She rises and approaches me, hands outstretched. “Let me see.”

I hesitate but eventually allow her to place her hands on my enormous belly. Her touch is clinical as she closes her eyes, sensing the baby’s energy.

“Hmm. Strong magical signature. A blend of earth magic and traditional witchcraft. Interesting.” She frowns. “Refuses to tell me the gender.” With a harrumph, she opens her eyes. “The child is ready, but something is blocking the process. Have you tried a labor induction spell?”

“Of course, I have,” I snap. “I’ve tried everything. Induction spells, potions, and enchanted teas. Even that ridiculous exercise where you walk up and down stairs sideways. Nothing works.”

“You haven’t tried prenatal yoga recently,” says Atlas.

Both my mother and I turn to stare at Atlas.

“Prenatal what?” she asks.

“Yoga. It’s a practice that combines gentle stretching, breathwork, and meditation. I offer special classes for pregnant magical beings at my gym. It can help prepare the body for labor and create optimal positioning for the baby.”

My mother scowls. “That sounds like new age nonsense.”

I jump to his defense. “Several witches in town have tried Atlas’s prenatal yoga and

swear by it. Cala Caldera says it helped her daughter arrive three days early.”

Mom’s nose curls. “I remember her. You two went to finishing academy together. Cala couldn’t brew a proper potion if her life depended on it.”

Atlas, undeterred, continues, “I could offer a private session here at home if you’d prefer, Zelda. No need to go to the gym.”

I’ve done yoga off and on since even before the pregnancy, but the thought of doing awkward stretches under my mother’s critical gaze makes me cringe. “Maybe later.”

“I think what my daughter needs is proper magical intervention. Where is your grimoire, Grizelda? I have several ancient spells that might be effective.”

“My grimoire is at the shop.” In truth, it’s hidden in our bedroom, but the last thing I want is my mother rifling through my personal spell book.

She rolls her eyes as if I’m deliberately inconveniencing her. “Then we should go to your shop. After breakfast, of course. I’m famished after my journey.”

Atlas immediately offers to cook. “I make excellent pumpkin pancakes. With a side of scrambled eggs, if you’d like?”

My mother sniffs but nods. “That would be acceptable.”

As he busies himself in the kitchen, she leans closer to me. “I see he still cooks. At least that talent hasn’t diminished in the five years since I last saw him. I remain unconvinced about his other...qualities.”

“He’s not a specimen, Mother. He’s my husband and the father of my child, and you were pleasant enough at our wedding.” I had suspected it was a facade, of course.

Mom had a future planned for me before I came to Evershift Haven. I was supposed to join the Matriarchy Council, marry a powerful patriarchal witch from the Male Council, and give her an assortment of grandchildren, most assuredly not fathered by a mountain troll.

She shakes her head. “I was being polite yet maintain a troll philosopher is an unusual choice for the daughter of one of the most respected witching families.”

Before I can retort, a sharp pain lances through my abdomen, stronger than the previous Braxton Hicks contractions. I gasp and clutch the arm of the sofa.

“Zelda?” Atlas is instantly at my side.

The pain subsides as quickly as it came. “I’m fine. Just another false alarm.”

“Perhaps not so false. Your aura flickered when that contraction hit. Something is changing,” says Mom.

I glare at her. “Don’t get my hopes up. I’ve been disappointed too many times already.”

“I arrived just in time. With my help, that baby will be here before the week is out.”

Atlas shoots me a concerned look, which I return with a slight eye roll. My mother’s “help” has always been a mixed blessing at best.

As he returns to the kitchen, and my mother begins unpacking various magical implements from her carpetbag, I rub my belly and silently communicate with my child. “Little one, there are now two stubborn witches waiting for you to make your appearance. It’s time to cooperate before your grandmother starts trying experimental magic on both of us.”

The baby responds with a forceful kick to my ribs, and I sigh. Clearly, stubbornness runs strong in the family.

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“A ND THIS IS OUR TRANSFORMATION room, Ms. Greenwarth,” says Atlas, gesturing to a spacious area with enchanted mirrors and specialized equipment. “For werewolves, shapeshifters, and others who need a safe space during physical changes.”

My mother follows with reluctant interest as Atlas continues his tour of Fae Fitness. I waddle behind them, already exhausted despite the early hour. After three days of my mother’s “help”—which has mainly consisted of critical commentary on everything from my magical techniques to the way I fold towels—I suggested she might like to see Atlas’s gym, partly to get her out of the house, and partly in the desperate hope that seeing his successful business might improve her opinion of him.

So far, she remains determinedly unimpressed. “What exactly is that?” She points to a contraption that resembles a cross between a hammock and a spinning wheel.

“That’s for aerial yoga,” he says. “It allows practitioners to achieve deeper stretches and inversions with the support of the silk.”

“Looks dangerous.” My mother sniffs.

“It’s one of our safest offerings,” Atlas says with infinite patience. “The silks are enchanted to support ten times the weight of the user and automatically tighten if a fall is imminent.”

“And this frivolous activity improves one’s magic how, exactly?”

Atlas smiles, clearly unperturbed by her skepticism. “Aerial yoga increases

circulation to the brain, which enhances mental clarity for spellcasting. It also strengthens the core, which, as any experienced witch knows, is essential for channeling magical energy.”

I catch the subtle implication that if my mother doesn’t know this, perhaps she’s not as experienced as she claims. By the tightening of her lips, I can tell she caught it too. I bite back a grin, realizing Atlas isn’t quite as unaffected as he seems.

“I’ve been casting complex spells for seventy years without hanging upside down like a bat,” she says sharply.

“And imagine how much more powerful those spells might have been with proper physical conditioning,” he says smoothly. “As Socrates said, ‘No citizen has a right to be an amateur in the matter of physical training.’”

“Socrates never had to push a baby out of his body,” I mutter, earning a snort of laughter from a passing dryad.

A sudden flutter of magic tickles my fingers, and I glance down to see small sparks dancing across my palms. These magical misfires have been happening more frequently as my due date has come and gone. Yesterday, I accidentally turned my nightstand into a tree stump at bedtime. It took nearly an hour to coax it back to its former state.

I discreetly try to shake away the sparks, but they only intensify, leaping between my fingers like tiny fireworks. A nearby rack of enchanted dumbbells begins to rattle ominously. Atlas notices immediately and steps between me and my mother, who has her back turned.

“Perhaps we should move on to the herbal refreshment bar,” he suggests loudly, using his broad body to shield my magical light show from my mother’s view.

“They’ve just gotten in a rare tea from the Midnight Mountains I think you might appreciate, Ms. Greenwarth.”

My mother turns, her eyes narrowing suspiciously at Atlas’s sudden enthusiasm for tea, but before she can question it, the dumbbells rise from their rack and begin orbiting around my head.

“What in the world...?” My mother’s eyes widen.

“Pregnancy magic,” he says calmly, reaching up to pluck the levitating weights from the air one by one. “Perfectly normal in the third trimester and happens to many magical mothers.”

“It most certainly does not,” says Mom. “I carried Grizelda for nine months without a single magical mishap.”

“Perhaps our little one has a unique magical signature.” Atlas catches the last dumbbell before it can collide with a passing client’s head. “A blend of witch and troll magic might manifest differently in utero.”

My mother purses her lips but doesn’t argue. The sparks around my hands gradually fade, and I release a tense breath. “Sorry,” I whisper to Atlas as my mother moves ahead to examine the refreshment bar.

“Nothing to apologize for,” he says with a wink. “Your magic is simply expressing your inner feelings. What did the dumbbells represent, I wonder? A desire to throw heavy objects at your mother, perhaps?”

Despite my fatigue and frustration, I laugh. “You know me too well.”

“I should hope so, after all we’ve been through together.” He places a gentle hand on

my belly. “How are you feeling, really?”

“Like I’m going to be pregnant forever.” I groan. “And my mother’s constant judgment isn’t helping.”

“She’s from a different generation,” he says diplomatically, “And she’s worried about you, in her own way.”

“Her own highly critical, passive-aggressive way,” I mutter.

“She loves you despite her manner.”

I snort.

“Understanding her perspective might make her presence more bearable.” He kisses my forehead. “Besides, she’ll only be here until the baby arrives.”

“At this rate, that could be years.” I sigh heavily.

My mother returns from inspecting the refreshment bar, looking marginally less disapproving. “The herbal selection is adequate,” she concedes, which from her, is practically a rave review.

“Thank you,” he says with a gracious nod. “We work closely with local magical herbalists to ensure quality and potency. One of our local sun witches, Talia Brightwell, grows many of the herbs we use, and some of our special blends come from Zelda’s shop.”

My mother raises an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Atlas has been a wonderful supporter of my business. He recommends my remedies

to his clients with various magical ailments.”

“Hmm.” My mother doesn’t comment further, but I can tell she’s mulling over the information. Perhaps she’s finally recognizing Atlas is more than just a gym-owning troll.

“Ms. Greenwarth, would you care to observe one of our specialized classes? The Advanced Magical Core Strengthening session is about to begin. Many participants report significant improvements in their spellcasting accuracy afterward.”

My mother hesitates, then gives a curt nod. “I suppose I could spare a few minutes.”

As we make our way to the classroom, another contraction seizes me. It’s stronger than a Braxton Hicks but still not quite labor. I grasp a nearby wall for support, and the stone ripples beneath my fingers, responding to my uncontrolled magic.

“Zelda?” Atlas is instantly at my side.

“I’m okay.” I breathe in and out as the pain subsides. “Just another false alarm.”

When I look at the wall, I see I’ve left a handprint embedded in the stone, glowing with purple magical energy. Around it, small vines sprout from the previously smooth surface, flowering with tiny purple and white blossoms.

“Impressive,” says my mother, sounding reluctantly impressed. “You haven’t had this kind of elemental manifestation since you were a teenager throwing tantrums.”

“Imm not throwing a tantrum,” I say with irritation, mortified as several gym patrons stop to stare at my magical handiwork.

Atlas rests his hand on the altered wall. “It’s an improvement. Adds character.” His

own earth magic flows into the stone, stabilizing the change and making it look like an intentional decorative element. “Perhaps you could add these throughout the gym, Zelda, as a signature magical touch from the co-owner.”

My mother’s head whips around. “Co-owner?”

“Not officially,” I say quickly. “Atlas is just being generous.”

“I’ve been trying to convince Zelda to merge our businesses,” he says. “Her magical remedies complement our physical training programs perfectly. Plus, she has the better head for business.”

This is news to me. We’ve discussed collaboration, but not an actual merger. I stare at him, wondering what game he’s playing, but his expression reveals nothing beyond sincere admiration.

“Is that so?” My mother’s tone turns calculating. “And what percentage of ownership would my daughter hold in this...merger?”

“Mother!” I’m horrified by her directness.

“Equal partnership,” he says without hesitation. “Fifty-fifty.”

“Hmm.” My mother studies him with renewed interest. “Perhaps you’re not as primitive as you appear.”

Atlas smiles. “Few things in life are as simple as they appear. As Plato observed, ‘Reality is created by the mind, and we can change our reality by changing our mind.’”

For the first time since her arrival, my mother looks genuinely taken aback. She turns

to me with a raised eyebrow. “You didn’t tell me he was so philosophical.”

“There’s a lot about Atlas I haven’t told you,” I say, unable to keep a hint of smugness from my voice. My smug moment is short-lived, however, as another wave of magic surges through me, this time causing all the lights in the corridor to flare brilliantly before exploding in a shower of sparks.

The gym is plunged into momentary darkness until Atlas quickly activates the emergency illumination crystals embedded in the ceiling. “Perhaps we should continue this tour another time,” he says tactfully as gym members look around in confusion.

My mother gives me a look that somehow manages to be both concerned and judgmental. “Yes, I think Grizelda needs to rest and regain her magical control. This display is most unseemly.”

“It’s not a display,” I snap, embarrassment making my tone sharper than intended. “It’s involuntary.”

“That’s even worse.” She shakes her head. “A witch without control of her magic is hardly a witch at all.”

“Mother...” I almost growl in frustration.

Atlas steps between us, his large form creating a physical barrier. “With all due respect, magical fluctuations during pregnancy are well-documented, especially in the final days before birth. I’ve seen it in many magical species—elves, fae, and even dragon-shifters. It’s a sign of the baby’s growing magical strength, not a failure of Zelda’s abilities.”

My mother looks like she wants to argue but eventually presses her lips together in a

tight line. “That was...uncommon in my day. Nevertheless, she should be at home where these...incidents can be contained privately.”

For once, I actually agree with her, if only to escape the mortification of destroying more of Atlas’s gym. “Let’s go home.”

As we leave Fae Fitness, my mother watches Atlas thoughtfully while he pauses to help an elderly dwarf navigate around the broken glass from the exploded lights. His gentleness with the much smaller being seems to register with her.

“He is unusual for a troll,” she says quietly as we walk home. “Quite articulate.”

“Atlas has three advanced degrees,” I say with no small amount of pride. “Philosophy, Magical Kinesiology, and Business Management.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Indeed? Where did he study?”

“The Mountainpeak Academy for the first two, and he did his business degree at the Evershift University extension program.”

For once, my mother seems genuinely impressed. The Mountainpeak Academy is one of the oldest and most respected educational institutions in the magical realm. “Yet he chose to open a gymnasium.” She clicks her tongue.

“A wellness center,” I correct. “It’s his passion to help magical beings maintain both physical and magical health through balanced practices.”

“Hmm.” She falls silent, and it seems she’s recalibrating her assessment of Atlas. It’s not acceptance, but it’s a start.

As we approach our cottage, another magical surge tingles through my fingertips,

causing the flowers along our garden path to suddenly triple in size, expanding their blooms to dinner-plate proportions. “Oh, dear,” I mutter.

“Your magical control is truly abysmal.” She sighs loudly. “Is it getting worse?”

“It comes and goes.” I carefully step around a sunflower now large enough to use as an umbrella. “The closer I get to labor, the more unpredictable it becomes.”

“Then for everyone’s safety, let’s hope the baby arrives soon.” My mother strides ahead, the overlarge flowers seeming to bend away from her as if intimidated.

I sigh and follow, praying to every magical deity I can think of that labor begins sooner rather than later. I’m not sure how much more of my mother’s “help” I can endure.

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“ABSOLUTELY NOT,” I declare, standing my ground in the middle of the nursery. “That crib stays exactly where it is.”

My mother purses her lips, her hand still raised from the levitation spell she was about to cast. “Grizelda, it’s facing east. Any witch worth her salt knows a magical child’s crib should face north to align with the earth’s energy fields.”

“This is my child and my nursery. The crib stays by the window where the morning sunlight can reach it.”

We’ve been at this all morning—debating, arguing, and rearranging every item in the nursery according to my mother’s outdated magical beliefs. The baby clothes must be folded in perfect thirds to “preserve their magical integrity.” The changing table must be positioned at a precise forty-five-degree angle to the door to “deflect negative energies.” It’s exhausting and infuriating.

“Fine.” Mim sniffs. “It’s your child. If you want to risk misaligning their magical meridians from infancy, that’s your prerogative.”

I roll my eyes and turn to straighten a picture frame, trying to contain my frustration. Atlas has wisely made himself scarce, claiming an urgent meeting at the gym. Traitor.

“Perhaps we should set up a magical protection circle,” she says, already opening her grimoire to an ancient protection spell. “A simple warding to ensure only positive energies enter the nursery.”

“I’ve already warded the entire house.” I gesture to the barely visible shimmer of

protective magic that outlines the windows and doors. “Atlas and I did it together. His earth magic reinforces my arcane protections.”

My mother snaps her grimoire shut. “Troll magic is crude at best. It lacks the refinement and precision of true witchcraft.”

“That’s an outdated prejudice,” I retort. “Atlas’s magic is different from ours but equally powerful in its own way. When combined with my witchcraft, it creates protections stronger than either of us could manage alone.”

Mom looks unconvinced but doesn’t argue. Instead, she runs a critical finger along the dresser, examining it for dust. “I suppose we should prepare the nesting spell,” she says. “It’s traditional to cast it in the final days before birth.”

“I know what a nesting spell is, Mother.” I struggle to keep my tone civil. “I was planning to cast it this evening when the moon rises.”

“Why wait? A proper nesting spell can be cast at any time with sufficient magical focus.”

“Because I’m tired.” I exhale slowly. “My magic has been unpredictable, and I want to be at full strength for the casting.”

My mother makes a dismissive noise. “Nesting spells are elementary magic. I was casting them for expectant mothers when I was barely out of my apprenticeship.”

“Not all of us had the benefit of your perfect magical control,” I snap, my patience finally breaking.

“Clearly not.” She eyes the nursery, where several stuffed animals have begun to float in response to my agitation.

I take a deep breath, willing the toys to settle back into their places. Most obey, though a small plush dragon continues to circle the ceiling like a mobile. “Why don’t we compromise?” I’m desperate to end this confrontation. “We’ll cast the nesting spell together this afternoon. That way, if my magic fluctuates, yours can stabilize the casting.”

My mother considers this, then gives a curt nod. “A sensible precaution. I’ll prepare the necessary components.”

As she bustles out of the nursery, I sink into the rocking chair, feeling utterly drained. The baby kicks forcefully, as if sensing my distress. “I know, little one,” I whisper, rubbing my belly. “Grandma means well. She’s just...intense. Like me, I suppose. You’ll probably be just as stubborn.”

The plush dragon finally drifts down from the ceiling, landing in my lap with a soft thump. I stroke its fuzzy head absently, wondering if Atlas is having a better morning than I am.

B Y MID-AFTERNOON, MY mother has transformed our living room into something resembling an arcane laboratory. Herbs and crystals are arranged in precise patterns across our coffee table and carefully labeled vials of magical essences gleam in the sunlight from the bay window.

“Are you sure we need all this?” I ask, eyeing a particularly noxious-looking potion bubbling in a small cauldron. “A nesting spell is supposed to be simple.”

“This is simple,” she says with a wave of her hand. “A basic seven-circle enchantment with elemental augmentation and lunar harmonization.”

Nothing about that sounds simple to me. The nesting spell I had planned involved a gentle enchantment to attract nurturing energies and encourage household objects to arrange themselves optimally for baby care, like wipes warming themselves and blankets folding themselves neatly. “What exactly does your version do?” I ask suspiciously.

“It creates a comprehensive magical environment conducive to infant development and parental efficiency,” she says, grinding something that looks suspiciously like dragon scales in a mortar. “The house itself becomes attuned to the baby’s needs, anticipating them before they arise.”

“That sounds...invasive,” I say, picturing our furniture rearranging itself without warning every time the baby hiccups.

“It’s comprehensive. Are you ready to begin? The juniper essence needs to be added precisely as the potion reaches a rolling boil.”

I sigh and take my position across from her. Despite my reservations, a small part of me is curious to see my mother’s advanced spellwork up close. For all her faults, Brunelda Greenwarth is unquestionably a powerful witch.

“We start with the invocation,” she says, closing her eyes and raising her hands. “Repeat after me.. .”

I dutifully repeat the Latin phrase, feeling the familiar tingle of magic building in my fingertips. So far, so good.

“Channel your energy toward the central crystal while I add the juniper essence.” She uncorks a small blue vial.

I focus on the clear quartz crystal in the center of the table, directing my magic

toward it as instructed. The crystal begins to glow with a soft purple light, which is the color of my magical signature.

My mother adds three precise drops of juniper essence to the bubbling cauldron. The potion hisses and changes color from murky green to a clear, shimmering blue. So far, the spell seems to be proceeding exactly as she planned.

That's when I feel a strong kick from the baby, followed by a sharp contraction that makes me gasp. My concentration wavers, and my magic surges unexpectedly, flowing into the crystal with far more force than intended.

"Grizelda," my mother warns, but it's too late.

The crystal pulses with blinding light, and the potion in the cauldron bubbles over violently, spilling across the table and onto my mother's open grimoire.

"No." She lunges to save the ancient book, but the damage is done. The potion seeps into the pages, causing the magical ink to run, and the protective enchantments to fizz and spark.

Worse, the crystal continues to pulse, sending waves of uncontrolled magic throughout the house. Around us, objects begin to respond chaotically to the interrupted nesting spell. Baby supplies from the nursery burst through the door, with burp cloths and diapers flying through the air like confused birds. The changing table scrapes across the floor before levitating and floating toward the front door.

"What have you done?" Mom clutches her soaked grimoire.

"I didn't mean to." I'm busy attempting to regain control of my magic. "It was the contraction that broke my concentration."

Outside the window, I see more baby items floating across the front yard—onesies flapping like tiny ghosts, pacifiers orbiting around the garden gnomes, and strangest of all, the crib we were arguing about earlier soaring majestically over the fence and down the street.

“Oh, no.” I groan, rushing to the window. “The spell is sending everything away instead of nesting it.”

“Because you inverted the energy flow,” says my mother while frantically trying to dry her grimoire with a heat spell that only makes the pages curl at the edges. “Your surge reversed the intent from ‘gather and arrange’ to ‘disperse and distribute.’”

“We need to stop it,” I grab my cloak from the hook by the door, “Before half of the nursery ends up scattered across Evershift Haven!”

My mother follows me outside, still clutching her damaged grimoire. “The spell can only be reversed with the proper countermeasure, which was in my book—now illegible thanks to your lack of control.”

“Not helping, Mother.” I watch in horror as a parade of baby clothes marches down the street, led by a particularly determined mobile that chimes merrily as it floats along. I attempt a simple reversal spell, pointing my wand at a nearby floating blanket, but another contraction hits at exactly the wrong moment, and instead of returning to the house, the blanket multiplies into six identical copies, all floating in different directions.

“Wonderful,” my mother mutters. “Now we have to retrieve the original and destroy the copies before they become permanent.”

“Let’s split up,” I say, already waddling as fast as my pregnant body allows toward the town square, where most of the items seem to be headed. “You go left, and I’ll go

right.”

My mother hesitates, looking deeply skeptical about my ability to handle the situation, but another explosion of magical energy from our house—sending the rocking chair rocketing into the sky like a wooden spacecraft—convinces her of the urgency.

“Very well, but be careful. In your condition, any further magical mishaps could have serious consequences.”

She hurries off down the left fork of the road, her cloak billowing dramatically behind her. I turn right, following the trail of floating pacifiers and baby socks toward the center of town.

I’m halfway to the town square when I literally bump into Atlas, who is carrying an armful of baby toys and looking bemused.

“Honey,” he says, catching a teddy bear as it attempts to escape his grasp, “I think these belong to us?”

“Nesting spell gone wrong.” I groan. “Everything from the nursery is escaping. We need to catch it all before someone gets hurt.”

“Like from that?” Atlas points upward, where the crib is now performing aerial acrobatics above the town hall.

“Exactly like that.” I groan again. “My magic surged during the casting, and instead of nesting, everything is flying away.”

“Don’t worry,” he says calmly. “As Epictetus said, ‘Make the best use of what is in your power and take the rest as it happens.’”

“I don’t think Epictetus ever had to deal with an enchanted crib doing loop-de-loops over a government building,” I say with a hint of irritation.

Atlas chuckles and hands me the toys he’s collected. “Hold these. I’ll get the crib.”

Before I can protest, he backs up a few steps, then runs forward and leaps with astonishing agility, his powerful troll legs propelling him onto the roof of the town hall. From there, he times his jump perfectly to intercept the flying crib, catching it mid-loop and landing with grace on the town square fountain.

“Show-off,” I mutter, but I smile at his heroics.

“I got the crib,” he calls down to me. “What else is missing?”

I do a quick mental inventory. “The changing table, the rocking chair, about two dozen outfits, the mobile, the diaper bag, and... Oh, no, Mr. Snuggles!”

“Mr. Snuggles?” Atlas repeats, looking concerned.

“The enchanted plush dragon. The one that sings lullabies when you squeeze its tail. It was the first gift we bought for the baby.”

He nods solemnly, understanding the significance, since I wouldn’t even entertain buying anything until I was well past the second trimester. At my advanced state of...maturity...there was a lot that could have gone wrong. “We’ll find him. Don’t worry.”

As I look around at the magical chaos spreading throughout Evershift Haven—baby items continuing to fly in all directions, my mother chasing floating booties down the street, and the rocking chair now giving an impromptu ride to an opportunistic garden gnome—I worry this disaster is beyond even Atlas’s calm philosophy to fix.

Somewhere in the midst of it all is my mother's ruined grimoire, soaked with a potion that was supposed to create the perfect nest for our baby but has instead scattered our carefully prepared nursery to the four winds.

If this isn't a metaphor for how parenthood will go, I don't know what is.

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“J UST A ROUTINE TRIP to the bakery,” Atlas had said after we finally tracked down our items and restored order to the nursery. “It’ll be fine,” he had assured me. “A perfect opportunity to show your mother more of the town.”

I should have known better.

Now, I’m standing in Bernadette’s Bewitched Bakery, watching in horror as the antique oak table—a family heirloom passed down through six generations of baker witches—slowly splits down the middle beneath Atlas’s carefully placed hand.

“I barely touched it,” he whispers, his expression mortified as the crack continues to spread with an ominous creaking sound.

My mother, who until now had been examining the enchanted pastry display with critical interest, turns at the noise. Her eyebrows rise as she takes in the scene of Atlas frozen in place, his massive hand still resting on the now-broken table.

“Strengthening charm,” she murmurs, flicking her wand discreetly. The crack stops spreading but doesn’t repair itself. “Temporary fix only.”

Bernadette emerges from the kitchen, a tray of freshly baked charm buns floating behind her. Her cheerful expression falters when she spots the damaged table. “Oh, dear,” she says.

“Bernadette, I’m so sorry,” Atlas begins, his normally confident voice tight with embarrassment. “I’ll replace it immediately.”

“Nonsense,” says Bernadette with forced brightness. “It’s just a table. These things happen.” Still, I can see the disappointment in her eyes. That table has been a fixture in the bakery for longer than I’ve been alive. Magical families have gathered around it for centuries, sharing enchanted treats and making memories.

“I can repair it,” I say, stepping forward before considering the wisdom of using my unpredictable magic on a priceless antique.

My mother shoots me a warning look. “Grizelda, in your condition—”

“It’s fine,” I insist, drawing my wand. “A simple restoration spell.”

Before anyone can stop me, I wave my wand in the familiar pattern for mending broken objects. I speak the incantation while focusing my will on the cracked wood.

For a moment, it seems to be working. The crack begins to close, and the wood fibers reach for each other across the divide. Then I feel the baby shift, and with it comes the now-familiar surge of uncontrolled magic.

The table doesn’t just mend. It transforms. The oak darkens and swirls, reshaping itself into an elaborate design that looks suspiciously like a baby’s cradle with four table legs. The surface curves inward, and decorative carvings of stars and moons appear along the edges.

“That’s...different,” says Bernadette diplomatically.

My mother sighs deeply.

“I can fix this,” I insist, raising my wand again, but Atlas gently places his hand over mine.

“Perhaps we should quit while we’re ahead. Or at least, before we turn it into a rocking horse.”

The logical part of me knows he’s right, but embarrassment and pregnancy hormones make a potent combination. “I’m not completely incompetent. I can cast a simple reversal spell.”

“Of course you can, dear,” says Mom in that insufferable tone that suggests exactly the opposite. “But should you?”

My magic is bubbling dangerously close to the surface, responding to my emotions. The star patterns on the table-cradle begin to glow ominously. I force myself to take a deep breath, then another. “Fine. Atlas, would you please plan to replace the table?”

“I’ll ask have Bram Stonehorn take a look. If he can’t fix it, he can build a new one.”

“In the meantime,” says Bernadette with a shaky smile, “Why don’t we focus on what you came for? Charm buns for the expecting mother, wasn’t it?”

The tension in the room eases slightly as she leads us to another table, this one mercifully still in its original form, and presents an array of pastries infused with beneficial magical properties. “The blueberry ones encourage restful sleep. The cinnamon promote healthy magical development, and the chocolate are just because chocolate makes everything better.” She grins.

I smile and nibble on a chocolate charm bun, feeling slightly better about the situation. Perhaps this outing won’t be a total disaster after all.

I should have known better.

Our next stop is Everglow Florist, where Atlas intends to order a special arrangement

for the baby's welcome celebration. The shop is a marvel of magical botany, with blossoms that change colors based on the viewer's mood and vines that helpfully reach out to offer samples of their fragrance.

"Magnificent," my mother says, genuinely impressed for once as she examines a rare moonbloom orchid that only opens during lunar eclipses. "The magical cultivation here is excellent."

Flora, the shop's owner and a distant cousin of the dryads, practically glows at the praise. "Thank you. We get several of our more recent additions from the Glimmerglow Grove, and I've been experimenting with cross-pollination between magical and non-magical species. It creates the most interesting hybrids."

Atlas is carefully making his way through the narrow aisles, mindful of his size among the delicate displays. I watch him with affection and concern, knowing his genuine efforts to be gentle don't always translate to success in spaces designed for smaller beings.

Sure enough, as he reaches for a catalog on a high shelf, his elbow brushes against a hanging basket of sensitive fairy lilies. The flowers, which respond to emotional energy rather than physical touch, immediately sense his anxiety and droop dramatically.

"Oh, no," he whispers, trying to project calm toward the wilting blooms. "Don't do that, little ones."

Flora notices immediately. "The fairy lilies." She hurries over. "They're empaths, and they've absorbed your worry."

"I'm so sorry." He looks mortified for the second time that day. "Can they be revived?"

“Yes, but they’ll need emotional transfusion.” She’s already retrieving a small crystal from her apron pocket. “I’ll need to channel positive feelings into them.”

My mother steps forward. “Allow me. I have extensive experience with empathic flora.”

She takes the crystal from Flora and holds it near the drooping flowers, closing her eyes in concentration. The crystal glows with a soft blue light—a color I’ve rarely seen in my mother’s magic, which tends toward more assertive purples and reds. Gradually, the fairy lilies begin to perk up, their delicate petals unfurling once more.

“Impressive,” says Flora, genuinely surprised. “Most witches can’t achieve that level of emotional projection.”

My mother hands back the crystal with uncharacteristic modesty. “I’ve always had an affinity for restorative magic.”

This is news to me. In all my years, I’ve never seen my mother tend a garden or nurture a houseplant. Her magic has always been practical, efficient, and occasionally intimidating—never gentle or nurturing.

Atlas catches my surprised expression and winks at me, as if to say, “See? There’s more to her than you thought.”

The moment of harmony is short-lived, however. As my mother turns to examine another display, Atlas reaches for the flower catalog again, determined to complete our original mission. This time, it’s not the fairy lilies that suffer but a rare specimen of singing snapdragons.

The flowers, which normally hum a gentle melody, take one look at Atlas and begin to wail in a high-pitched chorus that sounds eerily like a baby’s cry. The sound

triggers another contraction—stronger than the previous ones—and my magic responds instantly, causing all the vases in the shop to overflow with water.

Flora scrambles to manage the sudden flood, while my mother attempts to quiet the hysterical snapdragons with a silencing charm that only makes them sing louder, now in perfect four-part harmony.

“Perhaps we should continue this another time,” says Atlas over the cacophony, already guiding me toward the door.

“Excellent idea,” my mother agrees, following close behind as water begins to seep into her sensible witch’s boots.

“I’ll send you a catalog by crystal mail,” Flora calls after us, valiantly trying to stem the tide with a containment spell.

Outside, I lean against a lamppost, breathing through the fading contraction. “This is a disaster,” I moan. “We’ve destroyed a priceless antique and flooded a flower shop, all in one morning.”

“Not a complete disaster,” says Atlas optimistically. “The bakery visit was partially successful. We did get charm buns.”

My mother snorts. “If that’s your metric for success, Mr. Mountainheart, I shudder to think what you consider a triumph.”

“Getting through the day without turning any more furniture into baby equipment would be a good start,” I mutter.

“Perhaps we should call it a day,” he suggests gently. “You look tired, Zelda.”

He's right. The magical surges and contractions—even the false ones—are taking their toll, but something in me rebels against admitting defeat so easily, especially in front of my mother. "One more stop. We still need to pick up the special baby blanket from Magical Threads. It's just around the corner."

Atlas and my mother exchange a look I can't quite interpret, but they both nod in agreement.

"One more stop, but then straight home for rest." He nods as if that's settled.

As we walk toward Madame Threads' shop, I'm between Atlas and my mother, physically and metaphorically. My mother remains stiffly formal, but I notice her casting appraising glances at Atlas when she thinks I'm not looking. For his part, Atlas continues to be unfailingly polite despite her critical comments.

"You know," he says conversationally, "I'm reminded of a saying by the philosopher Heraclitus. 'Even a soul submerged in sleep is hard at work and helps make something of the world.'"

My mother gives him a sharp look. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that sometimes, what appears to be failure on the surface is actually progress beneath. Today might seem like a series of disasters, but perhaps we're building something important through these shared experiences."

I expect my mother to dismiss his philosophical musing with a cutting remark, but instead, she considers his words thoughtfully. "An optimistic perspective," she says finally. "Though I must point out that Heraclitus was also known as the 'weeping philosopher' for his pessimistic view of human nature."

Atlas's eyebrows rise in surprise. "You're familiar with pre-Socratic philosophy?"

“I wasn’t always a cranky old witch,” she says dryly. “I was quite the scholar in my youth.”

This revelation stuns me into silence. My mother, a philosophy scholar? The woman who measured my childhood potion ingredients down to the microgram and insisted that practical magic was the only magic worth studying?

Before I can question this new information, we arrive at Magical Threads, where I pray—to any deity who might be listening—that we can retrieve a simple blanket without catastrophe.

I should have known better.

The moment we step inside, Madame Threads’ enchanted scissors spring to life, snipping wildly at an innocent bolt of fabric. My mother quickly freezes them with a flick of her wand, but the damage is done. Half the inventory has been reduced to confetti-like scraps.

“I’m so sorry,” I apologize to the horrified proprietor. “Pregnancy magic. I’ll pay for everything.”

We leave without a blanket or my dignity and decide to cut through the town square on our way home. That’s when another contraction hits, and it’s the strongest yet. I stumble, grabbing Atlas’s arm and accidentally sending a surge of magic directly into the central fountain.

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“I ’M FINE,” I INSIST for the third time in as many minutes, since the fountain mishap, though the sweat beading on my forehead suggests otherwise. “It’s just another false contraction.”

Atlas hovers anxiously beside me, his large hand supporting my back as I breathe through the pain. We’re standing in the town square, where half of Evershift Haven has gathered to witness my latest magical mishap—the transformation of the central fountain from its usual elegant water display into a spectacular chocolate milk geyser.

“I didn’t know chocolate milk came in that shade of green,” says Hecate, Bella’s dog familiar, who has materialized beside us to observe the chaos with undisguised glee.

“It’s not supposed to be green.” I groan, watching as several fairies happily bathe in the sugary substance, their wings turning sticky and iridescent. “It’s supposed to be water.”

“On the bright side, the children seem to be enjoying it,” Atlas says optimistically.

He’s right. A group of young witches and wizards have gathered around the fountain, gleefully collecting the magical chocolate milk in cups, jars, and in one resourceful child’s case, a hastily enchanted hat.

“This is precisely the sort of public display I was concerned about,” says my mother sharply, approaching from the direction of the town hall where she’s presumably been doing damage control. “Your magical outbursts are becoming a spectacle, Grizelda.”

“I’m aware, Mother,” I say through gritted teeth as another contraction builds. “Believe me, I’m not doing this for attention.”

“Obviously not.” She sniffs. “But a witch with proper training should be able to maintain control even in...challenging circumstances.”

“My wife is nine months pregnant, Brunelda,” says Atlas, his normally gentle voice taking on a protective edge. “Perhaps criticism isn’t the most helpful approach right now.”

My mother bristles. “I am merely pointing out—”

“That a pregnant witch’s magic can be unpredictable and powerful, yes, we’re all aware,” Atlas interrupts, surprising both of us with his firmness. “But Zelda is handling it remarkably well given the circumstances.”

I stare at him in surprise. My husband, the philosopher troll, who typically avoids confrontation at all costs, is standing up to my mother. For me.

My mother seems equally taken aback. She opens her mouth to respond, then closes it again, reassessing the mountain troll before her. “Very well,” she says finally. “What would you suggest...Atlas, given your extensive knowledge of pregnant witches?” The sarcasm in her tone is impossible to miss, but Atlas doesn’t rise to the bait.

“I suggest we focus on helping Zelda channel her magic in a controlled environment,” he says calmly. “The prenatal yoga classes I mentioned use specific techniques designed for magical beings to maintain balance during pregnancy.”

“Yoga,” my mother repeats skeptically. “You believe downward dog poses will prevent chocolate milk fountains?”

“Prenatal yoga for magical beings isn’t just physical poses,” he says patiently. “It incorporates energy channeling, magical meridian alignment, and specialized breathing techniques that help stabilize fluctuations in arcane power.”

My mother eyes him with reluctant interest. “And you’ve seen this work for other pregnant witches?”

“Three in the past year alone, including a local witch, who was casting uncontrolled weather spells every time she sneezed before she started the classes.”

I remember that pregnancy well, including the unexpected snowstorms in July, and the miniature tornadoes in the library. By the end of her term, she had gained such control that she could direct her magical surges into creating perfect weather for garden parties.

“It’s worth trying, Mother,” I say, wincing as the contraction finally eases. “I’m open to anything that might help at this point.”

My mother considers this, her critical gaze softening slightly as she takes in my exhausted state. “Very well, but I insist on observing the first session.”

“Of course,” says Atlas readily. “Transparency is always welcome. As Kant said, ‘Science is organized knowledge. Wisdom is organized life.’”

“Kant was talking about empirical knowledge, not mystical yoga practices,” my mother retorts, but there’s less heat in her voice than before.

“Perhaps we could continue this philosophical debate at home?” I suggest hopefully. “After we fix the fountain?”

Atlas and my mother both turn to look at the chocolate milk geyser, which has now

attracted a flock of sugar-loving pixies in addition to the sticky fairies.

“Yes, that would be prudent,” says Mom, already drawing her wand. “A simple reversal spell should—”

“Wait,” Atlas interrupts gently. “With respect, Ms. Greenwarth, I think we should let Zelda try first.”

My mother stares at him incredulously. “After everything that’s happened today?”

“Yes,” he says with firm confidence. “Magic is like any other skill. It improves with practice, especially under challenging conditions, and I believe in my wife’s abilities. She’s the Guardian of Evershift Haven, and this is merely a slight deviation from her usual skills.”

His faith in me, stated so simply and with such certainty, brings unexpected tears to my eyes. Pregnancy hormones, no doubt.

“Go ahead, Zelda.” He places a supportive hand on my shoulder. “Center yourself first. Remember the breathing exercises we practiced.”

I take a deep breath, then another, feeling my racing heart slowing slightly. Around us, townspeople watch with a mixture of curiosity and caution, some taking prudent steps backward. They’ve lived through nine months of my unpredictable pregnancy magic, so I can hardly blame them.

Drawing my wand, I focus on the fountain, visualizing it returning to its natural state. “Aqua Restauo ,” I incant clearly, channeling my magic with careful precision. For a moment, it seems to be working. The green chocolate milk begins to clarify, returning to transparent water. The sticky fairies grumble in disappointment.

Then I feel another contraction building, stronger than the last. My concentration flickers, and with it, my control over the spell.

The fountain doesn't revert to water. Instead, it begins to spray pumpkin juice, the orange liquid arcing high into the air before raining down on the square. Several townspeople shriek in surprise as they're doused with the unexpected shower.

"Oops," I mutter, lowering my wand in defeat.

Atlas, now dripping with pumpkin juice, merely shrugs. "At least it's nutritious."

My mother, who somehow managed to remain completely dry by raising a perfect spherical shield around herself, lowers her protection with a sigh. "Perhaps we should leave this to someone not currently gestating a magical being," she suggests, stepping forward with her wand raised.

With a complex series of movements too fast for me to follow, she casts a spell that not only returns the fountain to its proper water state but also cleans every surface splashed by chocolate milk and pumpkin juice, including the sticky fairies, who look considerably less pleased about this development.

"Impressive," says Atlas sincerely, running a hand over his now-clean tank top.

My mother accepts the compliment with a small nod before turning to me. "Shall we return to your home before you transform the town clock into a rubber duck or some such nonsense?"

Despite her critical words, I detect a hint of concern in her voice, and perhaps even a touch of sympathy. Progress, of a sort.

As we make our way home, I feel like the townspeople are watching us. Some look

amused, and others concerned, but most seem to have accepted that a pregnant witch with unpredictable magic is just one more quirk of life in Evershift Haven.

We're nearly at our cottage when we encounter Bella from the Enchanted Espresso, hurrying toward the town square with a concerned expression. "Zelda? Is it true you turned the fountain into green chocolate milk that then became pumpkin juice?"

I sigh heavily. "News travels fast in this town."

"Are you kidding? Hecate can't keep a secret." Bella grins. "It's the most excitement we've had since Mallory's cat familiar accidentally transformed into a tiger last Samhain."

"Glad I could provide entertainment," I say with a hint of hurt feelings.

Bella's expression softens. "Hey, no one's upset. We all know pregnancy magic is unpredictable. My cousin turned her husband blue for a week before she gave birth."

"Blue?" Atlas asks, intrigued.

"Bright cobalt," Bella confirms. "It wasn't a bad look, actually. Brought out his eyes."

Despite my embarrassment, I laugh. It feels good to know our neighbors are taking my magical mishaps in stride.

"I should get to the square," Bella says. "Hecate says the sugar-high pixies are trying to organize a synchronized swimming routine. Can't miss that."

As she hurries off, my mother watches her with a thoughtful expression. "At least the townspeople seem understanding of your...situation."

“Evershift Haven is special that way,” says Atlas proudly. “We embrace the unexpected. It’s what makes our community magical in more than the literal sense.”

My mother makes a noncommittal sound, but her rigid posture relaxes slightly. Perhaps she’s finally beginning to see what drew me to this town, and to the kind-hearted troll beside me.

As we approach our cottage, I’m overcome with a wave of exhaustion so profound I stumble slightly. Atlas catches me easily, steadying my elbow with his large hand. “That’s enough excitement for one day. Time for rest.”

For once, I don’t argue. The magical outbursts have drained me completely, and the contractions—false or not—have left me aching and weary.

“I’ll prepare a restorative tea.” My mother is already moving toward the kitchen as we enter the house.

I blink in surprise at this uncharacteristic gesture of nurturing. “Thank you, Mom.”

Atlas helps me settle on the sofa, arranging pillows behind my back and tucking a blanket around my legs with tender care. As always, his solicitous attention makes my heart swell with affection.

“I’ll be right back,” he says, heading to our bedroom.

In his absence, I study my mother as she moves efficiently around our kitchen, measuring herbs with practiced precision. There’s something different about her today—a softening around the edges that I can’t quite define. She abruptly speaks without turning around. “Your Atlas is not what I expected.”

“Oh?” I try to keep my tone neutral, though my pulse accelerates at this opening.

“Mmhmm.” She adds a pinch of something to the brewing pot. “He’s clearly educated, thoughtful, and his devotion to you is evident.”

Coming from my mother, this is practically a ringing endorsement. I wait, sensing there’s more she wants to say.

“I still think a troll is an unusual choice,” she continues, her back still to me, “But perhaps not as unsuitable as I initially believed.”

Before I can respond to this unexpected concession, he returns, carrying my favorite quilt from our bedroom and a small wooden box I recognize as containing my collection of magical crystals.

“I thought these might help stabilize your energy,” he says, carefully arranging the crystals around me in a pattern designed to balance magical fluctuations.

My mother observes this with obvious interest. “A nontraditional arrangement,” she notes, bringing me a steaming cup of tea, “But the resonance pattern is sound.”

“Thank you.” Atlas accepts the assessment with a gracious nod. “I’ve been studying magical harmonics as they relate to physiological processes. The traditional pentagram arrangement doesn’t account for the unique energy pathways of pregnancy.”

My mother’s eyebrows rise slightly. “Indeed. Few practitioners recognize that distinction.”

I sip my tea, watching this unexpected moment of professional respect between my husband and mother. The tea is perfect—soothing and subtly infused with magical properties that ease both my physical discomfort and my magical instability. “This is delicious.”

“An old family recipe,” Mom says dismissively, though I detect a hint of pleasure at my compliment. “Nothing special.”

“Yet remarkably effective.” Atlas looks at me as if studying the subtle glow of balanced magic now surrounding me. “Your knowledge of herbal combinations is impressive, Ms. Greenwarth.”

My mother actually flushes slightly at the praise. “Yes, well... One picks up a few tricks over twenty decades of witchcraft.”

As the restorative tea works its magic, my eyelids grow heavy. My last conscious thought before drifting into a much-needed nap is that perhaps this visit isn’t the complete disaster I feared. Perhaps, like so many things in life, it’s simply a complicated blessing in disguise.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:42 am

“W ELCOME, EVERYONE, to the first-ever Witcher Wellness Workshop,” Atlas announces the next afternoon at the prearranged event that I insisted he proceed with, feeling much better today. His deep voice echoes through the transformed space of Fae Fitness.

The main exercise room has been cleared of its usual equipment and now features an array of specially designed magical fitness apparatuses, including enchanted yoga mats that adjust their cushioning based on the practitioner’s needs, floating meditation crystals that hover at the perfect eye level, and most intriguing of all, a set of dumbbells that shimmer with arcane energy.

I stand at the back of the room, watching with pride and nervousness as Atlas introduces his newest program to an audience that includes not only my skeptical mother but also several of Evershift Haven’s most prominent magical practitioners. “Today, we’ll explore the intersection of physical wellness and magical potency. Many magical beings focus exclusively on developing their arcane abilities while neglecting the physical vessel that channels that power. Our goal is to create harmony between body and magic, resulting in more controlled, more powerful spellcasting.”

My mother, seated primly in the front row, raises a skeptical eyebrow but doesn’t interrupt. Progress.

“Let’s begin with a simple centering exercise,” he says, demonstrating a stance that looks deceptively easy—feet planted firmly, spine straight, and arms extended with palms facing upward.

The assembled group follows his lead, some more gracefully than others. My mother,

to my surprise, moves into the position with fluid ease, her posture perfect.

“Focus on your magical core,” Atlas instructs. “Visualize your internal energy as a sphere of light at your center. With each breath, we’ll expand that sphere outward, creating a magical-physical connection that reinforces both.”

The room fills with the soft glow of various magical signatures as the participants follow his guidance. Blues, greens, reds, and purples shimmer around the practitioners. My mother’s signature—a deep violet with silver streaks—manifests with particular clarity.

Atlas catches my attention and smiles, clearly pleased by the group’s engagement. This workshop has been his passion project for months, and seeing it finally come to fruition fills me with happiness for him.

That happiness is short-lived as a now-familiar contraction seizes me. This one is different—sharper and more insistent—triggering an immediate magical response. My purple energy flares outward in a sudden burst, colliding with the carefully balanced energies in the room.

The effect is immediate and chaotic. The enchanted yoga mats curl up like startled caterpillars. The floating meditation crystals shoot toward the ceiling like rockets, and most dramatically, the magical dumbbells rise from their rack and begin to orbit the room like miniature planets, picking up speed with each circuit.

“Duck,” yells someone as a particularly enthusiastic dumbbell swoops low over the participants’ heads.

Atlas, always calm in a crisis, moves to the center of the room. “Everyone, maintain your centering stance. Your stable energy will help counteract the disruption.”

Most of the participants comply, though a few dive for cover as the dumbbells continue their erratic flight. My mother not only maintains her stance but actually extends her magical aura outward, creating a buffer that deflects the wayward equipment.

I try to regain control of my magic, but the contraction makes concentration impossible. Another surge ripples through me, and now, the treadmills along the wall spring to life, their speed increasing to alarming levels. One breaks free of its moorings and begins to skid across the floor like a magical mechanical bull. At least no clients are using them at the moment.

“Atlas.” I gasp as the contraction subsides, blinking back tears. “I’m so sorry.”

He makes his way to me, deftly dodging a pair of enchanted jump ropes that have decided to play cat’s cradle without human assistance. “Don’t apologize,” he says, placing a steadying hand on my shoulder. “This is actually a perfect demonstration of why this workshop is necessary. Magical control under challenging circumstances is exactly what we’re practicing.”

His ability to reframe chaos as a teaching opportunity would be admirable if it weren’t so exasperating. “The treadmill is about to break through the wall,” I point out.

“An excellent example of magical momentum,” he agrees, as if this is a planned part of the curriculum.

My mother, having apparently decided that enough is enough, strides through the mayhem with impressive dignity. With a complex series of gestures, she brings the flying dumbbells to a halt, returns the treadmill to its proper place, and generally restores order to the room.

“Perhaps,” she says tartly, “The practical demonstration portion of today’s workshop has been sufficient.”

Atlas beams at her. “Excellent work, Ms. Greenwarth. You’re a perfect example of centered magical response under pressure. Would you mind explaining your technique to the group?”

My mother blinks, clearly surprised by being asked to teach, but after a moment’s hesitation, she straightens her already impeccable posture and addresses the room. “The key to maintaining magical control in chaotic situations is threefold,” she says, slipping into a professorial tone I’ve rarely heard from her. “First, you must establish an unshakable internal rhythm, ideally based on your heartbeat. Second, you must create clear boundaries between your magic and external influences, and third, you must maintain awareness of your entire magical field while focusing on the specific task at hand.”

The participants, many of whom had been ready to flee moments before, are now listening with rapt attention. Even I find myself drawn in by her unexpectedly engaging teaching style.

“Think of your magic as a symphony orchestra,” she continues, warming to her subject. “You are the conductor. Each instrument—each aspect of your power—must be acknowledged and included, but only certain sections are emphasized at any given moment. The rest remain ready but subdued.”

“A brilliant analogy,” says Atlas sincerely. “Would you be willing to demonstrate the application of this approach to a simple levitation exercise?”

And just like that, my mother—who arrived in Evershift Haven convinced Atlas’s gym was a frivolous waste of space—takes over the Witcher Wellness Workshop with the authority of someone born to teach.

I watch in amazement as she guides the group through exercises that combine physical movements with magical techniques, her explanations clear, and her demonstrations flawless. Atlas assists, adding insights about how each movement supports the magical flow, but it's clear my mother has become the star of the show.

By the end of the two-hour workshop, the participants are glowing with accomplishment. Several approach my mother afterward, asking questions that she answers with unexpected patience.

"That was...unexpected," I say to Atlas as we observe from the sidelines.

"Not entirely," he says with a knowing smile. "Your mother's magical control is exceptional. I suspected she would be an effective teacher if given the opportunity."

"You set this up? You knew she would take over."

He shrugs, his massive shoulders rising and falling like mountains in miniature. "I created an opening. She chose to fill it."

"Sneaky," I say admiringly, "And surprisingly manipulative for a philosopher."

"Socrates was an expert at leading others to discover their own knowledge through strategic questioning. Sometimes, the most effective teaching happens when people don't realize they're being taught."

My mother approaches us, her cheeks flushed with unusual color, and her eyes bright with an energy I haven't seen in years. "An interesting concept," she says to Atlas, "Though your initial explanation of magical-physical integration could use refinement."

"I would welcome your input," he says. "Perhaps you might consider co-teaching the

next session?"

My mother looks startled, then thoughtful. "Perhaps," she says noncommittally, though I detect a hint of interest in her tone. "I'm not convinced that those enchanted dumbbells serve any practical purpose."

"The magical resistance they provide strengthens both physical muscles and magical channels," he says, "But I agree, the enchantment needs fine-tuning. Currently, they're a bit too responsive to ambient magical fluctuations."

"Obviously," my mother says dryly, glancing at the ceiling, where a pair of dumbbells still hover stubbornly out of reach. "A simple modification to the binding spell should resolve that issue. I could show you, if you're interested?"

"I would be most grateful," he says, and I marvel at his ability to accept criticism and suggestions with such genuine grace.

As my mother launches into a technical explanation of magical binding principles, I try to pay attention, but my mind wanders. Another week past my due date, endless false contractions, and still no baby. The frustration builds like pressure in a cauldron.

"Perhaps we should head home." Atlas clearly notices my distraction. "It's been a long day."

My mother looks between us, then nods. "Yes, Grizelda looks tired. We can discuss the binding modifications another time."

The walk home is quiet. Even the May evening air, usually so refreshing, feels heavy with my disappointment. Atlas keeps a supportive hand on my lower back as we navigate the familiar streets.

Once home, my mother excuses herself to her room. "I'll be working on my notes for your class, Atlas. Call if you need anything. Or you, Grizelda," she adds, like I'm an afterthought.

Atlas helps me upstairs to our bedroom. As soon as the door closes behind us, I sink onto the edge of our bed with a frustrated groan. "Still nothing. Not a single real contraction all day. Just another one of those weird ones that causes everything around me to go haywire." I rub my enormous belly. "I'm beginning to think this baby is never coming out."

Atlas sits beside me, covering my hand with his larger one. "He or she will come when they are ready."

"What if it's never ready?" My voice cracks. "What if I have to be pregnant forever? I can barely tie my own shoes, I haven't seen my feet in months, and I'm so tired of waiting."

"As Lao Tzu said—"

"If you quote one more philosopher at me right now, I swear I'll scream." But there's no real heat in my words, just exhaustion.

He chuckles softly and pulls me against his side. "No philosophy then. Just us."

I lean into his solid warmth, breathing in his familiar scent of stone and moss with a hint of earth magic. "I miss us. I miss feeling like myself. I miss..." I trail off, heat creeping into my cheeks.

"What do you miss?" His voice has dropped lower, and I feel the rumble of it through his chest.

"I miss being close to you. Really close." I turn to face him, noting how his amber eyes darken with understanding. "It's been weeks since we've been intimate, and I know you're being careful with me, but..."

"But?" He reaches up to stroke my cheek, his touch lingering.

"Maybe that's exactly what we need." I catch his hand, bringing it to my lips to kiss his palm. "I've heard it can help induce labor."

His eyebrows rise. "Is that so?"

"Mmhmm. Something about oxytocin and prostaglandins." I shift closer, running my hand up his chest. "Very scientific."

"If it's for science..." He cups my face with both hands, studying me intently. "Are you sure? I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. You never do." I close the distance between us, pressing my lips to his.

The kiss starts gently, almost tentatively, but quickly deepens as weeks of pent-up desire surface. Atlas makes a low sound in his throat, sliding one hand into my hair, and the purple strands wrap around his arm independently, while the other traces down my spine.

I break away just long enough to straddle his lap, my swollen belly between us. "I need you," I whisper against his mouth. "I need to feel like a woman again, not just an overdue incubator."

He grips my hips, pulling me closer despite the awkward angle. "You're always a woman to me. My woman. Beautiful, powerful, and carrying our child." He kisses along my jaw, finding that sensitive spot below my ear that makes me shiver. "Let me

show you."

I melt against him as he continues his exploration, his stone lips surprisingly soft against my heated skin. When he reaches the neckline, I help him ease the fabric over my head, leaving me in just my undergarments.

Atlas's intake of breath is audible. His hands hover over my changed body—fuller breasts, rounded belly, and wider hips—as if afraid to touch. "You're stunning." His voice is rough with desire. "Like a fertility goddess come to life."

I take his hands, placing them on my swollen breasts. "Then worship me."

He doesn't need to be told twice. His large hands cup me gently, brushing his thumbs over my sensitive nipples through the thin fabric of my bra. I arch into his touch, a soft moan escaping my lips.

"So responsive." He unhooks my bra with surprising dexterity, tossing it aside. "I've missed this too." When his mouth closes over one peaked nipple, I gasp at the sensation. Pregnancy has made me incredibly sensitive, and every touch feels magnified. He lavishes attention on both breasts, alternating between gentle sucking and teasing flicks of his tongue.

"Atlas..." I stroke his head. "I need more."

He pulls back to look at me, his amber eyes swirling with desire. "Tell me what you want."

"You. All of you." I reach for the hem of his shirt. "I want to feel your skin against mine."

We work together to remove his clothes, revealing his magnificent stone body. Even

after all this time, the sight of him takes my breath away—all carved muscle and strength, yet capable of such tenderness. I run my hands over his chest, tracing the natural patterns in his stone skin. When I reach lower, wrapping my fingers around his impressive cock, he groans.

"Careful, love. It's been a while for me too."

"Then we'd better make this count." I stroke him slowly, watching his face contort with pleasure.

Atlas has other plans. With careful strength, he lifts me, repositioning us so I'm lying back against the pillows with him kneeling between my legs.

"Let me take care of you first." He hooks his fingers in my underwear, sliding them down and off. "I want to taste you."

Heat floods through me at his words. He spreads my thighs wider, taking a moment to admire the view before lowering his head. The first touch of his tongue against my clit makes me cry out. He's always been skilled at this, but tonight feels different—more intense and more desperate. He licks and sucks with single-minded focus, using his knowledge of my body to drive me wild.

When he slides two thick fingers inside me while his tongue circles my clit, I nearly come off the bed. I grasp the sheets as pleasure builds rapidly.

"That's it," he murmurs against me. "Let go for me."

He curls his fingers just right, finding that spot that makes me see stars, and I shatter. My orgasm rolls through me in waves, leaving me gasping and trembling. Atlas doesn't let up, working me through the aftershocks until I'm squirming from oversensitivity. Only then does he kiss his way back up my body, pausing to nuzzle

my belly.

"Hello in there," he whispers. "Daddy's trying to convince you it's time to come out."

The tender moment makes my heart swell, but my body has other demands. I reach for him, pulling him up for a deep kiss. I can taste myself on his lips, which only fuels my renewed arousal.

"I need you inside me," I whisper against his mouth. "Please, Atlas."

He positions himself carefully, mindful of my belly. "Like this?" His cock enters me slowly, and he watches my face for any sign of discomfort.

I wrap my legs around his waist as best I can, urging him deeper. "Oh, that's perfect."

He starts to move, setting a gentle rhythm that gradually builds in intensity. Each thrust sends sparks of pleasure through me, and I notice something new. Our magic is responding to our connection.

Purple light dances along my skin wherever he touches me, while silver energy emanates from him. The two colors swirl together, creating beautiful patterns in the air around us. "Do you see that?" I gasp as he hits a particularly good angle.

"Our magic knows we're creating something together." He speeds up slightly, driving deeper. "Not life this time, but love."

The combination of physical pleasure and magical connection is overwhelming. I feel another orgasm building, this one deeper and more powerful than the first. "Atlas, I'm close."

"Me too." His thrusts become more erratic. "Together?"

I nod, unable to form words as the tension coils tighter in my pussy. He reaches between us to circle my clit with his thumb, and that's all it takes. I come with a cry of his name, clenching my inner walls around him. The magical energy explodes outward, filling the room with swirling lights. Atlas follows immediately, groaning my name as he spills inside me.

For several moments, we stay joined, trading soft kisses as we catch our breath. The magical light show gradually fades, leaving us in the soft glow of twilight.

"I love you," I whisper, running my fingers along his jaw.

"And I love you." He carefully withdraws and settles beside me, pulling me against his chest. "Feeling better?"

"Much." I snuggle closer, feeling more relaxed than I have in weeks. "I don't think it worked though. No contractions yet."

"Give it time." He strokes my hair soothingly. "If nothing else, we've reminded each other what we have together."

I'm about to respond when I feel a different kind of tightening, low in my belly. I place a hand there, waiting.

"Zelda?"

"Shh." I concentrate as the sensation builds, peaks, and slowly fades. "That felt...different."

We wait in silence. Five minutes later, another one comes. Then another after only four minutes. "Atlas." I meet his gaze, excitement and nervousness mingling in my chest. "I think it actually worked."

His face lights up with joy and wonder. "Really?"

As if in answer, another contraction grips me, stronger than the others, and making me squeeze his hand. "Really." I laugh, then wince as it peaks. "Our baby has interesting timing."

He kisses my forehead. "Should I get your mother?"

"Not yet." I want to savor this moment of just us before everything changes. "Let's time a few more to make sure they're consistent."

So we lie there together, timing contractions and sharing quiet moments between them. The sky gradually lightens, and by the time they're coming every three minutes, there's no denying it.

"I think it's time." Atlas helps me sit up and find a clean nightgown.

"Time to meet our child." The words fill me with equal parts terror and joy.

As Atlas goes to alert my mother, I pause at the doorway, looking back at our bed—the site of so many intimate moments, and now the place where our journey to parenthood truly began.

Another contraction reminds me there's no time for nostalgia. Our baby is coming, and nothing will ever be the same.

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“I THINK WE’RE OFFICIALLY in labor,” Atlas says, his normally calm voice tinged with excitement and anxiety.

My mother looks up from her tea, her eyes narrowing as she observes me waddling into the kitchen with one hand pressed against my lower back. “Consistent contractions?” she asks clinically.

“Three minutes apart for the past hour,” I say, lowering myself carefully into a chair. “And they’re definitely stronger than the Braxton Hicks.”

My mother sets down her teacup with deliberate precision. “It appears your child has finally decided to make an appearance.”

Despite her matter-of-fact tone, I detect a hint of excitement in my mother’s voice. She rises and begins gathering items from around the kitchen—herbs from the windowsill, crystals from the decorative bowl on the counter, and her wand from where it rests beside her teacup.

Atlas kneels beside my chair, his massive hand engulfing mine. “How are you feeling?”

“Nervous. Excited. Ready.” I squeeze his fingers. “Mostly ready. I’m so tired of being pregnant.”

He smiles, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “As Aristotle said, ‘Patience is bitter, but its fruit is sweet.’”

“If you quote one more philosopher during my labor, I might turn you into a garden gnome,” I threaten, but the effect is ruined by my smile.

“I’ve prepared a list of relevant philosophical insights for each stage of childbirth,” Atlas says with a mischievous twinkle in his amber eyes. “With appropriate timing for maximum inspirational impact.”

My mother snorts from across the kitchen. “Save your breath. When the serious contractions begin, philosophical platitudes will be the last thing she wants to hear.”

“Don’t underestimate the power of—” Atlas begins but is interrupted by my sudden gasp as another contraction seizes me.

This one is stronger and deeper, accompanied by a distinctive popping sensation and a rush of warmth between my legs. “My water just broke,” I say unnecessarily, as the puddle spreading across the kitchen floor makes it rather obvious.

Atlas’s eyes widen, and for the first time since I’ve known him, he seems momentarily speechless. My mother, in contrast, springs into action with impressive efficiency. “Atlas, help Grizelda to the birthing room we prepared. I’ll gather the remaining supplies and alert the midwife.”

Minerva Nightbloom has been the town’s magical midwife for over thirty years and my practitioner since the beginning of the pregnancy. I’m surprised by my mother’s willingness to share authority, having prepared myself for a fight to include Minerva, but she takes it in stride. Another contraction hits, and this one makes me gasp with its intensity.

“Time to go,” Atlas murmurs, scooping me into his arms with effortless care.

As he carries me toward the birthing room, my leaking amniotic fluid leaves a trail of

magical aftereffects, making small flowers sprout from the hardwood, miniature rainbows arc between furniture pieces, and leaving a faint purple glow that lingers in the air behind us.

“My magic is going wild again,” I say, watching as the doorknob transforms into a small singing bird before reverting to metal as we pass through.

“It’s part of the process. The magical barriers between mother and child begin to dissolve during labor, creating energy fluctuations.”

“How do you know that?” I ask, momentarily distracted from my discomfort by his unexpected knowledge.

“I’ve been reading every book on magical childbirth I could find for the past seven months.” His cheeks turn a darker gray, revealing his flush of embarrassment. “That included some rather obscure trollish texts requiring special translation charms.”

My heart swells with affection for this extraordinary being, who has prepared for our child’s birth with the same thoroughness he applies to everything else in life.

In the birthing room, Atlas gently lowers me onto the specially prepared nest of enchanted cushions. The room looks ready, with crystals positioned at cardinal points, magical candles flickering with protective flames, and a shimmer of protective spells visible around the perimeter.

“I’m going to change into something more practical,” I say, looking down at my now-soaked nightgown.

Before I can move, my mother enters the room, arms laden with additional magical implements. With a flick of her wand, she transforms my wet nightgown into a comfortable birthing robe of soft lavender fabric.

“Thank you,” I say, genuinely grateful for her practical magic.

She nods briskly. “Minerva is on her way. In the meantime, let’s begin the magical preparations.”

The next hour passes in a blur of increasing discomfort punctuated by my mother’s efficient instructions and Atlas’s steady support. Contractions intensify, coming closer together, with each one triggering magical surges that transform the room in unpredictable ways. Flowers bloom and wither in the corners. The ceiling briefly becomes transparent, revealing a sky that shifts between night and day regardless of the actual time. At one point, all the furniture except the birthing nest levitates three feet off the floor.

“Quite the magical light show,” comments Minerva Nightbloom when she finally arrives, ducking as a flock of conjured butterflies swoops past her head. The midwife is a small, round woman with silver hair twisted into an elaborate knot and eyes that shift color with the magical currents in the room.

“Zelda’s magic has been particularly responsive during pregnancy,” says Atlas, wiping my forehead with a cool cloth.

“Common with powerful witches,” she says with a comforting smile. “Especially when the baby has mixed magical heritage. Troll-witch combinations are rare but historically quite powerful.”

Another contraction grips me, stronger than any before, sending a wave of purple energy rippling outward. The walls of the room briefly turn to crystal before returning to normal.

“Seven centimeters dilated,” Minerva says after examining me. “Moving along nicely.”

“It doesn’t feel nice.” I gasp as the contraction subsides. “It feels like I’m being torn in half.”

“The pain has purpose,” says my mother, unexpectedly taking my hand. “It brings your baby closer to us with each wave.”

Her rare gesture of physical comfort surprises me so much that I momentarily forget my discomfort. “Mom?”

“I was in labor with you for twenty-six hours,” she says, her voice softer than I’ve ever heard it. “The longest and most worthwhile day of my life.”

This glimpse into my mother’s experience—this connection between us as women and mothers—moves me deeply. Before I can respond, another contraction claims my attention, this one so powerful that my magic explodes outward, turning everything in the room temporarily purple.

“Transition phase,” says Minerva calmly, seemingly unfazed by her newly violet appearance. “Things will move quickly now.”

She’s right. The next hour is the most intense experience of my life, with pain beyond what I thought possible, magical surges that defy all attempts at control, and a growing urge to push that becomes impossible to resist.

Atlas remains at my side throughout, his solid presence staunch despite the magical chaos swirling around us. He supports my back when I need to sit up, cools my brow when I’m burning with exertion, and whispers encouragement that somehow rises above the din of my magical misfires, all without one utterance of philosophy.

“You’re doing brilliantly,” he assures me. “Our child is almost here.”

“I can’t.” I gasp after a particularly overwhelming contraction. “It’s too much.”

“You can,” says my mother firmly. “Grizelda Greenwarth does not give up.”

“As Seneca said,” Atlas begins, and despite my earlier threat, I find myself listening eagerly for whatever philosophical wisdom he’s about to impart, “‘Sometimes even to live is an act of courage.’”

A laugh bubbles up unexpectedly, breaking through the pain. “You and your philosophers,” I manage to say before another contraction builds.

“The head is crowning.” Minerva gives me an approving smile. “With the next contraction, I need you to push with everything you have, Grizelda.”

The next wave of pain comes with an irresistible urge. I bear down with all my strength, feeling an impossible stretching and burning. My magic surges uncontrollably, causing the entire house to shudder on its foundation. Outside, I vaguely register the sounds of magical chaos—wind howling, objects clattering, and what might be the distant whinny of a conjured spectral horse.

“One more,” encourages Minerva. “One more big push.”

Gathering my remaining strength, I push with every ounce of determination I possess. There’s a sudden release, a sliding sensation, and then the most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard—my baby’s first indignant cry.

“She’s here,” Atlas whispers, his voice thick with emotion. “A girl, Zelda, and she’s perfect.”

Minerva places the squirming, wet bundle on my chest, and time seems to stop. She’s tiny and red-faced, with a dusting of silver-white hair like her father’s and eyes that,

when they briefly blink open, show hints of amber like his but mixed with my purple color. Her skin is the same shade of green as mine, but it has the rippling water effect of living stone like his. She's larger than most witch or human babies, due to being part mountain troll, but I like the substantial weight of her in my arms. It feels right.

"Hello, little one," I whisper as tears flow freely down my face. "We've been waiting for you."

Atlas leans in, his massive face comically gentle as he gazes at our daughter. A single tear traces a path down his stone cheek, crystallizing into a tiny diamond as it falls. "She's miraculous," he says simply.

My mother approaches, and I'm shocked to see moisture in her eyes as well. She touches the baby's head with uncharacteristic gentleness. "She has powerful magic. I can sense it already."

As if in confirmation, the baby gives a tiny sneeze, and all the magical chaos that has been swirling around the room suddenly settles, returning objects to their proper places, colors normalize, and a profound peace descends over the birthing space.

"Already showing her talent for bringing order to chaos," says Atlas proudly. "A valuable skill in this family."

The three of us laugh, united in this perfect moment of new life and new beginnings. The long journey of pregnancy, with all its discomforts, unexpected turns, and maternal invasions, fades into insignificance. All that matters is this tiny being in my arms, the devoted father beside me, and the surprising softness in my mother's eyes as she welcomes the newest witch into our family's long and complicated lineage.

Our daughter yawns, her tiny face scrunching up in an expression so like Atlas's thoughtful frown that I smile. The pain is already a fading memory as I stare down at

my daughter, sensing the magic my mother mentioned. She's powerful, but she's also hungry and starts opening her mouth a moment later, clearly looking for food.

“Definitely my child,” says Atlas with approval that makes me laugh.

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THE FIRST TWENTY-FOUR hours after our daughter's birth pass in a blur of wonder, exhaustion, and unexpected magic. We name her Lyra Violet Mountainheart-Greenwarth—a name as unique as the magical heritage she carries.

Over the next few days, Atlas transforms into a father with the same wholehearted dedication he brings to everything, learning to change diapers with his massive hands and cradling our tiny daughter against his stone chest with exquisite gentleness. The sight of them together—this towering troll with his impossibly small daughter—never fails to make my heart swell with affection.

“She’s a perfect blend of us,” he says as we watch Lyra sleep in her crib—the same one that once performed aerial acrobatics over the town square during my pregnancy magical mishaps.

Lyra’s magic had made itself known within minutes of her birth. By the first evening, we discovered her emotions affect the objects around her. Her contentment causes flowers to bloom in her nursery, while her hunger physically tugs at my breasts, insisting I approach to nurse her—not that I’d resist. Her displeasure during diaper changes temporarily transforms the changing table into various alarming shapes.

“She’ll need specialized training,” says my mother, entering the nursery with a steaming mug of restorative tea for me. “Mixed magical heritage can create unpredictable manifestations.”

I accept the tea gratefully. My own magic has mostly returned to normal after the birth, though I still experience occasional surges when particularly tired or emotional.

“We’ll find the right teachers when the time comes,” says Atlas confidently. “Until then, we have a houseful of magical expertise to guide her.”

My mother raises an eyebrow at being included in this statement but doesn’t contradict him. In fact, she’s been surprisingly helpful and non-critical since Lyra’s birth, with brewing specialized potions to aid my recovery, casting protective enchantments around the nursery, and holding Lyra while Atlas and I catch moments of much-needed rest.

Now, she approaches the crib, her expression softening as she gazes down at her sleeping granddaughter. “She has the Greenwarth nose,” she notes with satisfaction. “And the magical signature is reminiscent of my great-grandmother Esmeralda—strong, with unusual harmonic resonances.”

“Is that good?” asks Atlas.

“Esmeralda was one of the most powerful witches of her generation. She could cast spells that most witches only dream of mastering, and she did it with remarkable precision and control.”

“High expectations to place on a four-day-old,” I comment, though secretly pleased by the comparison.

“Not expectations,” says my mother. “Observations. What she does with her gifts will be her own choice.”

This too surprises me—the acknowledgment of choice and individual paths. My mother certainly never offered me such freedom growing up, with her rigid training schedules and exacting standards.

As if reading my thoughts, she turns to me with an unusually reflective expression. “I

may have been...somewhat inflexible in my approach to your magical education, Grizelda.”

This admission—the closest thing to an apology I’ve ever received from my mother—renders me momentarily speechless.

“Watching you during labor...” She continues when I don’t respond, “I was reminded of your inherent strength. Your magic has always been powerful, if somewhat undisciplined, but you’ve found your own way to harness it effectively, despite my rather...rigid methods.”

“Mom...” I’m unsure how to respond to this unprecedented vulnerability.

“The point is,” she says briskly, her moment of reflection apparently complete, “Lyra will find her own magical path as well, with proper guidance from all of us.”

Atlas steps in smoothly. “We’re fortunate that she’ll have such a wealth of magical knowledge to draw from—your expertise in traditional witchcraft, Zelda’s innovative approaches, and my earth troll traditions.”

“Yes, well...” My mother straightens her already impeccable robes. “Speaking of expertise, I’ve taken the liberty of preparing a specialized tincture for the baby. It will help stabilize her magical fluctuations during sleep.”

She withdraws a tiny crystal vial from her pocket, filled with a shimmering golden liquid. “One drop on her forehead before bedtime should suffice.”

“Thank you,” I say sincerely, accepting the vial, “For everything, Mother. These past few days... You’ve been incredibly helpful.”

She waves away my gratitude with a dismissive gesture, but there’s a faint flush of

pleasure on her cheeks. “I’m a grandmother now,” she says, as if this explains everything. “It’s my prerogative to be useful.”

A soft whimper from the crib indicates Lyra is waking, and all attention immediately shifts to her. As Atlas gently lifts her, her eyes open fully, revealing irises of swirling silver and purple, a perfect blend of her parents’ magical signatures. “Hello, little philosopher,” he murmurs, cradling her against his chest. “Did you have inspiring dreams?”

Lyra responds by waving her tiny fists, sending small sprays of purple and silver sparks into the air. The mobile above her crib begins to spin of its own accord, and the stuffed animals arranged along the nursery shelf perform a brief, synchronized dance before settling back into immobility. Mr. Snuggles spins in a circle three times and lets out a puff of smoke before curling up to go back to sleep, once again appearing to be just a stuffed animal.

“Someone’s feeling energetic,” I say with a smile.

“And hungry, I suspect,” my mother adds. “That particular magical signature often indicates a need for nourishment.”

Within moments, Lyra’s face scrunches up in preparation for a demanding wail. Atlas hands her to me as my breasts gently orient toward Lyra’s position with a small tug, and I settle into the rocking chair to feed her.

As Lyra nurses contentedly, her magic sinks into a gentle glow that surrounds us both like a protective cocoon. My mother watches for a moment, then discreetly withdraws from the nursery, leaving Atlas and me alone with our daughter.

“Your mother is warming to me,” he says quietly, perching on the window seat nearby.

“I’ve noticed. I think she’s impressed by your philosophical quotes and your extensive reading on magical childcare. She respects knowledge and preparation.”

“And perhaps she’s realizing that love takes many forms?” He smiles. “Some less conventional than others.”

I look up from Lyra’s peaceful face to my husband, who defies all stereotypes, combines physical strength with intellectual depth, and handles both ancient philosophical texts and newborn diapers with equal competence. “I’m so glad we met.”

“Technically, you walked into my gym first,” he reminds me with a smile. “Looking for troll sweat, if I recall correctly.”

“For a fertility potion.” I laugh quietly. “Life has a sense of irony.”

“Or purpose,” he suggests. “As Marcus Aurelius said, ‘Accept the things to which fate binds you, and love the people with whom fate brings you together, but do so with all your heart.’”

“For once, I think your philosopher has it exactly right,” I say, looking down at our daughter’s perfect face. “With all my heart indeed.”

T HE FOLLOWING MORNING brings our first visitors—a carefully selected few friends allowed past my mother’s protective screening at the door. Bella arrives first, bearing enchanted pastries that adjust their flavors to match the eater’s nutritional needs. Hecate trots behind her, jumping onto the side of the bassinet with a little magic and nods approvingly after sniffing her. “Excellent addition to Evershift Haven,” she says knowingly before jumping down.

“Oh, she’s gorgeous.” Bella takes Hecate’s place, leaning over the bassinet, where Lyra sleeps. “Look at those little fingers, and that silvery hair! Oh, and she’s already casting dream sparkles.”

Sure enough, tiny motes of magical light drift upward from Lyra’s sleeping form, creating miniature constellations that hover briefly before dissolving.

“Dream manifestation already,” says my mother with poorly concealed pride. “Most magical children don’t display that ability until at least three months.”

“She’s advanced,” Bella says diplomatically, “Though my cousin’s twins turned their crib into a sailing ship at two days old, so magical babies can be full of surprises.”

Atlas, who has been hovering protectively near the bassinet, finally relaxes enough to offer Bella tea. As they chat, my mother pulls me aside.

“I’ve been considering my departure date,” she says without preamble.

My heart sinks unexpectedly. Despite our complicated relationship and the tension of her visit, the thought of her leaving creates a hollow feeling I hadn’t anticipated. “Oh?” I manage. “I thought you planned to stay a month.”

“That was the original plan, but you seem to have things well in hand here. The baby is thriving, your recovery is progressing normally, and your household appears...functional.”

This last word, from my mother, is high praise indeed for the home Atlas and I have created.

“You’re welcome to stay,” I surprise myself by saying. “Lyra should have time to get to know her grandmother.”

My mother appears surprised by this invitation. “You want me to stay?”

“I do.” I realize it as I say it, the truth of it settling comfortably. “You’ve been helpful, and your knowledge of infant magical development is valuable. Plus,” I add with a small smile, “Lyra seems to enjoy your singing.”

This references a moment I’d witnessed the previous night of my mother singing an ancient witch’s lullaby to Lyra, unaware that I was watching from the doorway. It was a song she used to sing to me, though I’d nearly forgotten it until hearing her gentle voice once again.

“I do know quite a few traditional magical lullabies. They help stabilize developing magical cores.”

“Then it’s settled,” I say. “Stay the full month as planned.”

She studies my face, perhaps seeking signs of insincerity, but must be satisfied with what she sees. “Very well, but I’ll need to send for additional supplies. I only packed for a week, thinking you might find my presence...intrusive.”

This rare moment of self-awareness from my mother leaves me momentarily speechless. Before I can respond, there’s a commotion at the front door, and the distinctive sound of Hecate’s greeting, followed by Evony’s apologetic tones.

“More visitors,” says my mother with a slight frown.

Throughout the day, a carefully regulated stream of visitors comes to meet Lyra. Evony brings a fae charm that will chase away nightmares, and Frost gives her a fae blessing. Candice Winters brings a miniature enchanted garden that will grow alongside the baby, with plants that respond to her magical development. Ronan presents her with a wooden pixie he carved himself, and Lyra reaches for it. In

seconds, the tiny toy flies to sit beside her on the mattress, level with her eyes as she coos with pleasure.

Hemlock from the apothecary presents a collection of protective charms specifically designed for mixed-heritage magical infants. Throk gifts her a tiny set of magical tools. “They’ll grow with her hands,” he says and shares a significant glance with Suzette. “I ordered a set for our baby too.”

I glance at Suzette’s stomach, which is still flat, but immediately sense the extra spark of life within now that I know it’s there. I would have noticed before his announcement if I wasn’t still recovering from childbirth. “Congratulations, my friends.”

Even Mayor Ambrosius makes an appearance, officially welcoming Lyra as the newest magical citizen of Evershift Haven.

With each visitor, I watch Atlas proudly introduce our daughter, his joy uncontained as he points out her tiny features and early magical manifestations. I also observe my mother, standing sentinel-like nearby, her critical gaze assessing each visitor for potential threats to her granddaughter’s well-being.

By evening, when the last visitor has departed, I’m exhausted but content. Atlas prepares a simple dinner while my mother performs her now-established ritual of checking and reinforcing the protective enchantments around the house.

“Your friends are surprising. Diverse but harmonious. It suits the town...and you,” she says as she returns to the kitchen.

I smile at the praise as my husband approaches with a steaming mug. “Chamomile tea with a drop of that calming elixir Hemlock brought.”

I accept gratefully, switching Lyra to my other shoulder. She's been increasingly fussy throughout the evening, her magical outbursts escalating with her discomfort. The nursery now contains a miniature rain cloud, three spontaneously animated stuffed animals, and a window that briefly transformed into stained glass before reverting to normal.

"She may be overtired from all the visitors," says my mother, reaching for her granddaughter. "I'll apply the tincture I prepared while you enjoy your tea."

To my surprise, Lyra calms almost immediately in my mother's arms, her little face relaxing as she gazes up at her grandmother with apparent fascination.

"She recognizes your magical signature," Atlas says. "Children are particularly sensitive to family magic."

"Indeed," my mother agrees, carrying Lyra toward the nursery. "We'll establish a proper bedtime ritual to help regulate her magical emissions."

As they disappear down the hall, he settles beside me on the sofa, his arm a comforting weight across my shoulders. "Your mother is quite taken with her."

"I've never seen her like this." I shake my head. "So...nurturing. It's a side of her I scarcely knew existed."

"People often discover new aspects of themselves through grandparenthood," he says thoughtfully. "As Plato suggested, 'The beginning is the most important part of the work.' Perhaps Lyra represents a new beginning for your relationship with your mother."

"Perhaps," I say, leaning against his solid warmth, "Though I'm too tired to properly appreciate Platonic insights at the moment."

He chuckles, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “Rest, then. You’ve created life and magic. Philosophy can wait until you’ve recovered.”

From the nursery comes the soft sound of my mother’s voice, singing the ancient lullaby once again. The melody weaves through our home like a spell, binding past and present, creating a bridge between generations of magical women.

As I drift into a much-needed rest against Atlas’s steady shoulder, I silently thank whatever twist of fate brought us all together in this moment—the critical mother, the philosophical troll, the stubborn witch, and the miraculous new life who has somehow managed to transform us all with her own special magic.

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THREE WEEKS AFTER LYRA'S birth, our home has settled into a new normal—or at least, as normal as a household containing two witches, a troll, and a magically gifted infant can be.

Lyra continues to display remarkable magical abilities for her age. One afternoon, she recreates a miniature solar system of diapers revolving around a container of wipes while I'm changing her.

"Gravitational manipulation at three weeks," my mother says with poorly disguised pride as she expertly captures a floating stack of diapers. "The Blackthorn twins didn't manage that until they were six months old."

"Mother, please don't turn my daughter's magical development into a competition." I sigh, though I too feel a flutter of pride at Lyra's precocious abilities.

"It's not a competition when there's clearly no contest," she says pertly, tucking the diapers securely into a drawer enchanted to resist Lyra's gravitational tampering.

Atlas wisely remains silent on this topic. He's become adept at navigating between my occasional postpartum emotional storms and my mother's confidence in her grandmotherly expertise.

"How is our little magical prodigy this morning?" he asks instead.

"Hungry and opinionated," I say as Lyra waves her tiny fists impatiently. "Like her mother and grandmother."

This earns me a rare smile from my mother. “The Greenwarth women have never been known for their patience, though your father used to say it was simply because we always knew exactly what we wanted.”

This casual mention of my father, who passed away when I was still at the finishing academy with Cala Caldera, years after his divorce from Mom, surprises me. She rarely speaks of him, and never with the fond tone she’s just used.

“I don’t remember him saying that,” I say carefully, settling into the rocking chair to feed Lyra.

“You wouldn’t.” She straightens already perfect stacks of baby clothes. “He said it to me privately, usually after you’d worn him down with your particular brand of stubborn determination as a child.”

The image of my serious, scholarly father being worn down by my childhood persistence brings an unexpected lump to my throat. “I wish he could have met Lyra,” I say softly.

“He would have adored her,” says my mother, her voice uncharacteristically gentle. “He always had a special fondness for strong-willed females, even if he couldn’t always live with them.” She smiles for a moment before returning to organizing baby clothes.

Atlas, sensing the emotional current in the room, discreetly murmurs something about checking the protective wards and slips out, leaving my mother and me in a rare moment of shared remembrance.

“I’ve been meaning to give you something,” she says after a moment, reaching into her robe pocket. She withdraws a small silver locket on a delicate chain. “This belonged to your father’s mother. It’s traditional to pass it to the first daughter when she has her first child.”

She places the locket in my free hand. It's heavier than it looks, warm with old magic that tingles against my palm. "It contains a preservation charm for memories. If you place a strand of Lyra's hair inside, it will create a magical impression of her at this age that you can revisit years from now."

I'm touched beyond words by this unexpected gift. That she kept it and passed it on even after their divorce and somewhat standoffish relationship that I remember, surprises me. "Mom, I... Thank you."

She waves away my gratitude with characteristic dismissiveness, but her eyes are softer than usual. "It's tradition," she says simply. "Besides, I have no use for sentimental trinkets at my age."

The moment is interrupted by a gentle knock at the nursery door. Atlas peers in, his expression apologetic. "Forgive the interruption, but Minerva is here for Lyra's one-month magical assessment."

"It's only been three weeks," I say.

"Apparently she's been called away to assist with an unexpected magical birth in the neighboring town. She thought it best to conduct Lyra's assessment before leaving."

My mother immediately switches to efficient mode. "The assessment should be conducted in neutral magical space. The living room would be best. Atlas, please move any amplifying crystals or enchanted objects that might interfere with an accurate reading."

As they bustle out to prepare, I finish feeding Lyra, burp her, and change her into a special assessment gown my mother embroidered with protective runes. By the time we join the others, the living room has been transformed into a proper magical examination space.

Minerva Nightbloom, the magical midwife who delivered Lyra, stands in the center of the room. Her silver hair is twisted into its usual elaborate knot, and her eyes—currently a calm blue—brighten when she sees us enter.

“There’s our special girl,” she says, approaching with hands outstretched. “May I?”

I carefully transfer Lyra to her arms. The midwife immediately begins a series of gentle magical passes over Lyra’s tiny form, murmuring incantations under her breath. Small colored lights appear above different parts of Lyra’s body—silver above her head, purple near her heart, and a fascinating swirl of both colors around her hands and feet.

“Magnificent,” Minerva pronounces after several minutes of examination. “Her magical core is fully formed and unusually stable for her age. The integration of witch and troll magics is proceeding beautifully. See how the energies weave together rather than remaining separate?”

She points to the swirling patterns, and indeed, the silver and purple energies twist around each other in an intricate dance rather than remaining distinct.

“Is that unusual?” asks Atlas, watching the lights with fascination.

“Quite,” says Minerva. “In most mixed heritage magical children, the different magical signatures remain separate for the first few years, gradually integrating as the child learns to control them. Lyra appears to have natural integration already.”

“What does that mean for her magical development?” asks my mother, her expression caught between professional interest and grandmotherly concern.

“It means she’ll likely have fewer of the typical struggles mixed-heritage children face—less magical instability and fewer uncontrolled outbursts as she grows,” Minerva explains. “Though given the strength of her core, she’ll still require

specialized training to harness her considerable power.”

As if to demonstrate this point, Lyra chooses that moment to sneeze, and the magical lights above her form expand explosively outward, temporarily transforming our ceiling into a miniature night sky complete with twinkling stars and a crescent moon.

“Case in point,” I murmur, gazing upward at the celestial display.

“Harmless manifestations,” Minerva assures us as the ceiling slowly returns to normal, “And actually quite controlled for her age. Most magical infants would have set something on fire or transformed furniture with that much power.”

“She turned a table into a cradle once,” Atlas says proudly. “At the bakery, before she was born.”

“That was me,” I remind him. “During pregnancy.”

“Ah, yes,” he acknowledges with a smile. “Though I maintain she was a contributing factor.”

Minerva completes her assessment with a few more magical tests, then carefully records her findings in an enchanted journal. “I’ll leave you with a developmental guide,” she says, handing my mother a small golden scroll. “It outlines what to expect over the coming months and suggests appropriate exercises to help channel her growing abilities.”

“I’m familiar with standard magical developmental protocols,” my mother begins, but Minerva cuts her off gently.

“This isn’t standard, Ms. Greenwarth. This is specifically tailored to Lyra’s unique magical signature. I’ve only seen this particular combination once before, nearly fifty years ago—another witch-troll child, who grew up to become one of our realm’s most

respected magical innovators.”

This information silences even my mother, who accepts the scroll with unusual humility.

After Minerva departs, with promises to return for a follow-up assessment when Lyra reaches two months, we gather in the living room to discuss what we’ve learned.

“An exceptional magical core,” my mother summarizes, already studying the developmental guide with intense focus. “With proper training, Lyra could become extraordinarily powerful.”

“Power isn’t everything,” I say gently, remembering the pressure of growing up with my mother’s high expectations. “What matters is that she’s healthy and happy.”

“Of course,” my mother says, though I can tell the concept of magical achievement without pursuit of power is somewhat foreign to her. “There’s nothing wrong with helping her reach her full potential though.”

Atlas, who has been listening quietly, finally speaks up. “Perhaps we can find a middle path. We’ll encourage her natural gifts while allowing her the freedom to develop at her own pace.”

“A philosophical compromise,” says my mother, with only minimal sarcasm.

“Exactly.” Atlas beams, choosing to ignore her tone. “As Aristotle taught us, virtue lies in the middle way.”

My mother rolls up the scroll with a sigh that’s more theatrical than genuine. “I suppose there’s some wisdom in that approach, though I maintain that structured magical education should begin early.”

“We have time to figure it out,” I remind them both, gazing down at Lyra, who has fallen asleep in my arms as tiny sparks of magic occasionally dance across her silver-white hair. “She’s only three weeks old.”

“Three weeks and already manipulating gravitational fields,” murmurs my mother, unable to completely suppress her pride.

THIS BECOMES THE PATTERN of our days—my mother suggesting increasingly structured approaches to Lyra’s magical development, Atlas advocating for a more organic, philosophical path, and me attempting to find balance between their perspectives while focusing on the immediate needs of a newborn with unpredictable magical abilities.

To my surprise, my mother extends her stay beyond the originally planned month, explaining that “proper magical foundations require consistent guidance.” I suspect her reluctance to leave has less to do with concern for Lyra’s magical education and more with the unexpected bond she’s formed with her granddaughter, but I don’t challenge her reasoning.

Instead, our household settles into a surprisingly functional routine. Atlas continues managing Fae Fitness, though he adjusts his schedule to be home more. My mother takes over much of the magical childcare during morning hours, implementing what she calls “foundational sensory exercises” that seem suspiciously like simply talking to Lyra about different magical theories while showing her enchanted objects.

I gradually return to my own work, brewing simple potions and preparing herbal remedies at a small workspace Atlas set up in our kitchen before transitioning to a few afternoons a week at the shop. I haven’t yet had time for more matchmaking, but I leave that in the hands of the other witches and beings in Evershift Haven, at least for the time being.

Whatever I'm doing, if it's at home, Lyra watches from a specially designed bassinet that hovers near my workbench, occasionally causing ingredients to float or bottles to glow when something catches her interest.

"She has your intuition for herbal combinations," my mother says one afternoon, watching as Lyra's magic causes a sprig of lavender to dance in harmony with a vial of moonstone essence—ingredients that do indeed work well together. "I always said your instinctive approach to potion-making was your strongest magical talent."

The compliment, delivered in my mother's matter-of-fact tone, nearly causes me to drop the mortar and pestle I'm holding. "You did?" I ask, unable to recall a single instance when she praised my intuitive brewing methods.

"Of course," she says, genuinely surprised by my reaction. "Why do you think I insisted you continue with advanced potions despite your resistance? Your natural talent was obvious."

"I thought you were just being controlling."

My mother purses her lips. "Perhaps my methods of encouragement were somewhat...firm, but the talent was undeniable."

This glimpse into my mother's thought process—the revelation that what I interpreted as criticism might have been her version of support—shifts something fundamental in my understanding of our relationship. It's not enough to erase years of feeling inadequate under her exacting standards, but enough to see her actions in a slightly different light.

That evening, as Atlas rocks Lyra to sleep while softly reciting Socratic dialogues, his version of bedtime stories, I find my mother in the garden, carefully harvesting moonflowers for a protective tincture she's been preparing.

“Need help?” I offer, joining her in the silvery light of the waxing moon.

She hands me a small pair of enchanted shears without comment, and for a while, we work in companionable silence, our movements synchronized from years of similar shared tasks during my childhood.

“I’ve been thinking,” my mother says eventually, “About what the midwife said regarding Lyra’s unusual magical integration.”

“Mmm?” I encourage, carefully trimming a perfect bloom.

“It occurs to me that her ability to naturally harmonize different magical signatures might be influenced by her environment.” My mother gestures vaguely toward our home, where warm light spills from the windows. “Specifically, by witnessing the way various magical approaches can complement each other rather than compete.”

I pause in my harvesting, surprised by this insight. “You mean because she sees witch magic and troll magic working together?”

“And different styles of witchcraft. Your intuitive approach, and my structured techniques. Perhaps the combination creates a more balanced magical foundation than either would alone.”

The admission costs her something—I can see it in the slight stiffness of her posture—but the fact that she’s made it at all feels monumental.

“That’s...remarkably philosophical of you, Mother.”

“Don’t tell your husband,” she says dryly. “I’ll never hear the end of it.”

I laugh, and after a moment, my mother’s lips twitch in what might almost be a smile.

“I’m glad you stayed.” The words emerge before I can overthink them. “It’s been good for Lyra, and for me.”

My mother doesn’t respond immediately, but when she does, her voice holds an unfamiliar softness. “I’ve learned some things as well. Your Atlas is not what I expected.”

“He surprises people that way.”

“He’s a good father and clearly devoted to you both. His magical knowledge is also more extensive than I anticipated.”

Coming from my mother, this is practically a declaration of adoration. I accept it as the peace offering it is.

“Perhaps I could return periodically,” she says, focusing intently on a particularly perfect moonflower. “For short visits. To assist with Lyra’s magical development as she grows.”

“I’d like that,” I say honestly. “Lyra should know her grandmother.”

The conversation shifts to lighter topics—the best methods for preserving moonflower essence, and the magical properties of herbs grown under different lunar phases—but something has definitively changed between us. It’s not a complete transformation, but a step toward mutual understanding that seemed impossible just months ago.

When we return to the house, arms full of silver-glowing blooms, we find Atlas in the nursery, Lyra asleep on his broad stone chest as he sits in the oversized rocking chair my mother enchanted to support his weight.

“She wouldn’t settle in the crib,” he whispers, his large hand gently patting our

daughter's back. "Apparently, philosophical discussions about the nature of reality make excellent lullabies."

My mother shakes her head, but there's no real disapproval in the gesture. "At least wait until she's walking before introducing existentialist theories," she murmurs. "Magical development follows cognitive pathways."

"Of course," he says solemnly. "We'll stick to basic metaphysics for now."

To my delight, my mother actually rolls her eyes, a surprisingly human gesture from someone who prides herself on perfect composure.

"I'll prepare the moonflower tincture," she announces, taking the harvested blooms from my arms. "It needs to steep under direct moonlight for maximum potency."

As she leaves, Atlas carefully shifts Lyra to a more comfortable position. Our daughter sighs in her sleep, and tiny motes of silver-purple light dance above her head, forming shapes that look remarkably like the constellations visible through the nursery window.

"Your mother has been almost pleasant today," he says quietly. "Should I be concerned about potential enchantment or identity theft?"

"Very funny." I settle onto the ottoman beside his chair. "I think she's finally coming to terms with us—this family, our choices...all of it."

"Ah." Atlas nods. "People change, especially when confronted with new experiences and relationships."

"Like becoming a grandmother," I say.

"Exactly. Roles redefine us in ways we can't anticipate." He looks down at Lyra with

tender adoration. “Just as becoming parents has changed us.”

“For the better, I hope.”

“Undoubtedly. As Nietzsche observed—”

“If you quote Nietzsche right now, I will turn you into a wishing well,” I say with a wink.

Atlas chuckles softly. “Fair enough, but I maintain philosophers have much to teach us about child-rearing.”

“Save it for your father-daughter lectures.” I reach out to stroke Lyra’s silky hair. “I’m sure she’ll be appropriately philosophical by the time she can speak full sentences.”

As if sensing she’s the topic of discussion, Lyra stirs slightly in her sleep, her tiny fingers flexing against Atlas’s chest. A small burst of magic escapes her, causing the stars painted on the nursery ceiling to briefly animate, shooting tiny comets across the magical constellations.

“She’s going to be extraordinary,” I whisper, watching the magical display.

“She already is. As are you.”

He reaches for my hand, his stone fingers warm and gentle against mine. As our hands connect, our magical signatures respond, creating a soft glow where skin meets stone—purple witch-light and silver earth magic combining to form a warm illumination that perfectly matches the color of our daughter’s magical aura.

In that moment of perfect harmony, with my husband beside me, our daughter sleeping peacefully between us, and even my mother finding her place in our

unconventional family, I feel a completeness I never thought possible.

As the enchanted stars continue their slow dance across our nursery ceiling, I silently thank whatever twist of fate or magical accident led me to walk into Fae Fitness that day, seeking troll sweat for a fertility potion. Some might call it coincidence. Others might call it destiny.

Atlas would undoubtedly point out, citing yet another ancient philosopher whose name I've already forgotten—perhaps it's simply the natural order of the universe bringing together exactly the right elements at exactly the right time to create a new kind of magic.
