

Chapter Three

“We don’t serve your kind here!”

Mr. Stewart’s loud voice boomed across the room, and very briefly the clink of silverware on plates and glasses paused, but if Maude had learned anything from her short time working at the Unarmed Inn, it was that nothing could stop the inhabitants of Dalness from a single-minded pursuit of food and drink. Maude paused on her way back to the bar, only to see a dejected looking centaur at the door.

“But—” the centaur started to protest, but he was cut off by Mr. Stewart.

“No! Out with you!” The centaur sighed and awkwardly walked backwards out of Maude’s sight.

Mr. Stewart was now walking to the bar, and Maude overheard him talking to himself about the audacity of having a centaur as a patron. Among the centaur’s perceived sins, first and foremost was that he hadn’t had any pants or shoes on. “Couldn’t even fit through the door,” Mr. Stewart grumbled. “And where would he sit?”

Maude thought the answer to his questions fairly obvious—the centaur would just stand and be served his food. And she knew that the centaur could indeed fit through the door—he would have had to stoop, yes, but he could have made it. But Maude knew better than to contradict Mr. Stewart when he got into a mood. Well, she knew better than to contradict Mr. Stewart at all.

Mr. Stewart, the owner of the Unarmed Inn, was Maude’s new employer and landlord. He was large to the point of being beefy and had a dark beard and mustache that completely obscured his sepia-toned face, and underneath his hair was a set of dark brown eyes.

Maude had stumbled on this job quite accidentally. Upon arriving on the outskirts of Dalness, she had ventured into the city limits to try her luck at finding a place of employment. She would need a job if she wanted to be able to afford a place to stay within the city, but she'd figured she could camp on the city outskirts for as long as she needed to. However, to her great fortune, she had stumbled upon the Unarmed Inn when exploring Dalness on her very first day and had crossed paths with Mr. Stewart just as he had been lamenting to anybody who would listen about a serving girl from the inn that had recently quit, leaving him shorthanded. Maude had volunteered her services. Mr. Stewart had been skeptical, but Maude had asked for a trial run, and then discreetly laid a spell on herself to make her light on her feet and able to carry more plates than she would have been able to otherwise.

Mr. Stewart had given her the job, which to Maude's delight was accompanied by a small room that she shared with a roommate along with a salary. The whole encounter struck Maude as witch's luck.

Maude's roommate was named Dahlia, and Maude was sure that Dahlia thought she was a bit odd for not knowing some of the most basic things, like how to make a bed without the sheets falling to the floor. Maude did know how to make a bed, but at first she hadn't known how to make a bed without using magic. Dahlia had quite kindly shown her some bedsheet techniques, but Maude couldn't help but to be embarrassed about the whole ordeal.

As soon as Maude could leave Mr. Stewart's side without him noticing, she ducked into the kitchen and grabbed a bowl of stew and a chunk of bread. Then she escaped outside.

The faint clamor of the Unarmed Inn could be heard still, but Maude ignored it as she peered into the darkness. The centaur had gone down the street and was just about to turn the corner.

“Hey, wait!” she called. The centaur kept going. “No, I mean it, I won’t hurt you, I’ve brought you some food!” The centaur stopped and looked behind him. Maude couldn’t see his face.

“Are you talking to me?” he asked. His voice was a deep bass, and Maude could almost feel the timbre of it vibrating under her feet.

“Yes,” she said. “My name is Maude, and it didn’t seem very fair to me that you weren’t allowed inside when we serve elves and werewolves every day, so I brought you some food.”

“You are going to get in trouble one day,” said the centaur. He moved closer and took the outstretched wooden bowl and lifted it to his nose, taking a deep inhale.

“I can handle myself,” said Maude, and the centaur quirked his eyebrow at her. He looked almost amused. “What is your name?” asked Maude.

“My name is Korius,” said the centaur. The lower, horse-shaped portion of his body was white with brown patches over it, and the skin tone of his torso and face was beige with warm tones in it. He wore a black vest that buttoned up to his throat and a grey, long-sleeved shirt underneath, and he was about the same age as Maude, from what she could tell.

Maude stared at Korius for a second, unsure of what to say. She had never had to meet new people before, with Cuven being such a small place. Maude was still consistently overwhelmed with the sheer number of people that could be found in Dalness. Luckily, the centaur seemed to be better suited to starting a conversation than she was.

“You haven’t been here long,” he observed.

“No,” said Maude. “How did you know?”

“You are being nice to me,” said Korius. “And even though you do not know me, you treat me as a sentient being, not a work animal.”

“People treat centaurs like work animals?” Maude exclaimed. “That’s awful!”

“Yes,” Korius agreed. He had not yet eaten any of the stew in the bowl and held it back to Maude. “May I eat that bread you are holding instead of this stew?”

“You don’t like stew?” Maude asked.

“Centaurs do not consume meat,” said Korius.

“Oh!” said Maude and exchanged the stew for the chunk of bread. “I’m sorry.”

“You could not have known,” said Korius. He tore a piece of bread off with his teeth and chewed and swallowed. “Why would a witch leave Cuven and come to Oblik?” he asked. “You have undoubtedly made things much harder for yourself by coming here.”

Maude froze. So far, she had been able to get by without anybody noticing that she was a witch. She looked up and down the street for anybody who might have overheard Korius’s words, but any sound on the street originated from the Inn. She thought back to the story that Maude had overheard Mary Ellen Foster telling soon after she came to Cuven, but tried to ignore it for now. “How did you know?” Maude hissed at Korius, keeping her voice down even though there was nobody to hear her. She tried to ignore the ringing in her ears—*I knew I couldn’t stay.*

Maude had been taking extra care to make sure that she did everything in the human way. Her first several attempts at tying her shoelaces by hand had tangled and then come undone, but Maude had managed on the first try today, an achievement she was quite proud of. Now, though, her toes curled in her boots, and she tried to disguise the trembling of her hands.

Korius looked confused. “Are you hiding that you are a witch, then?” he asked.

“Of course I am!” Maude exclaimed.

Korius still had a puzzled expression on his face. “But why?”

Maude stared at Korius for a second before responding. “But you said it yourself,” she said. “It would only make things harder.”

“But you would hide who you are in favor of portraying human tendencies?”

“Well, yes,” said Maude. “I don’t think they would be as nice to me if they knew.” Her heart twisted at the idea of her status as a witch being revealed—the revelation would lead to a harsher penalty than people simply not being so nice to her. She would be thrown in jail, at the very least. As much to change the subject as to try to understand what she had done to give away her position as a witch, she asked again, “How do you know that I am a witch?”

Korius looked at her. “I am a centaur,” he said, as though the answer was obvious.

“Yes,” said Maude. “But how do you know?”

“Centaurians can sense that sort of thing,” Korius said. He cocked his head at her. “You did not know that?”

“No,” said Maude. She hoped that if she encountered other centaurs, they wouldn’t be so quick to remark on the fact that she was a witch, especially if other people were nearby. The door of the Unarmed Inn slammed open and she looked behind her nervously, where she saw some of the Inn’s patrons drunkenly stumble out of the door. They were elves, Maude thought, but she couldn’t be sure from this distance. Maude looked back at Korius. “You can’t tell anybody,” she said.

Korius nodded. “As you wish,” he said. He spoke slowly, though, and Maude thought that perhaps he still didn’t understand why it was important that her identity be kept a secret.

“It’s important,” Maude insisted. “They could do...awful things to me. It’s illegal to practice witchcraft.”

“I will keep your secret,” Korius said. “This must be why you are the first witch I have encountered since arriving here. Witchcraft is not a topic creatures tend to bring up.”