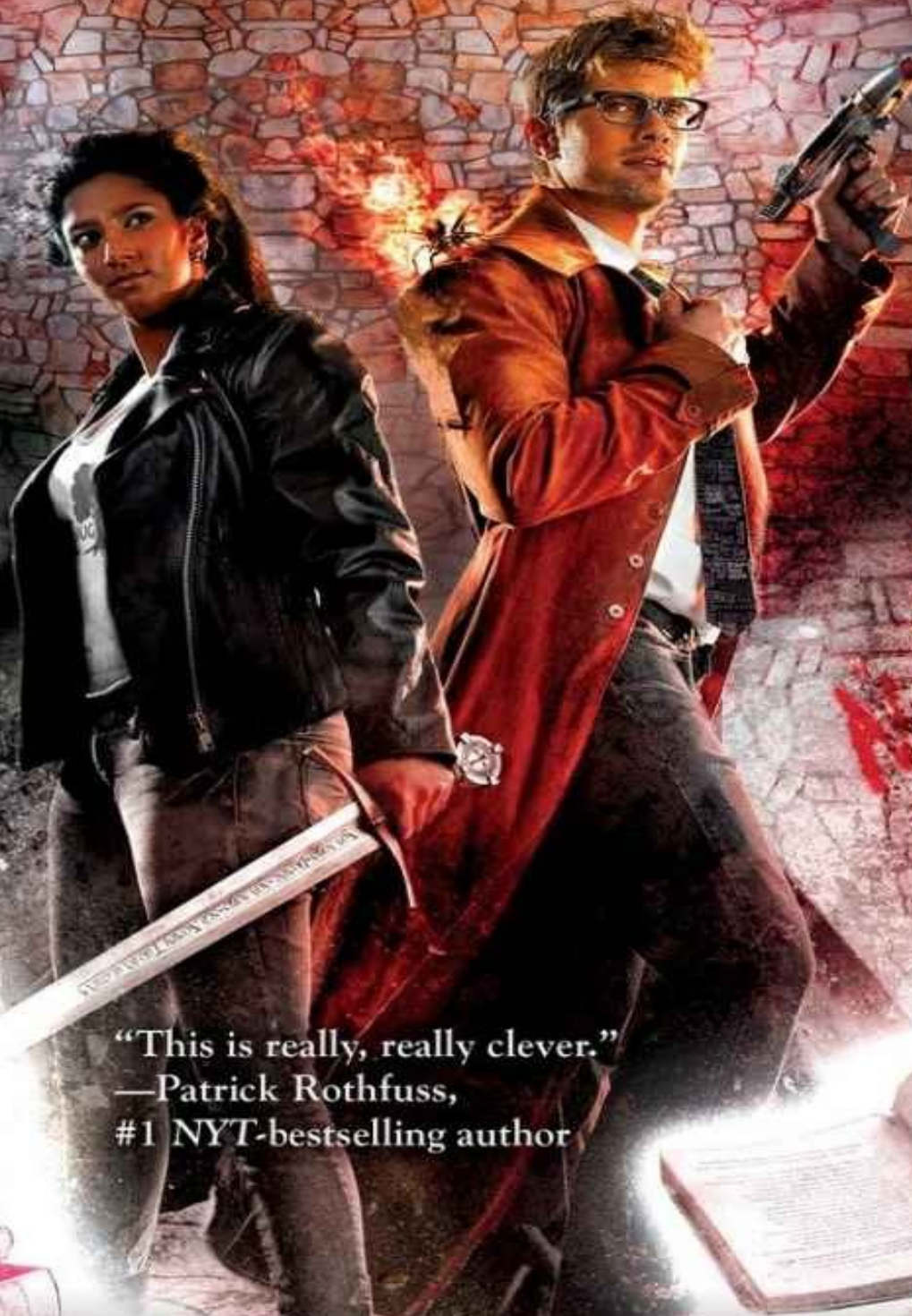


REVISIONARY

MAGIC EX LIBRIS:
BOOK FOUR



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JIM C. HINES

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DAW Book Collectors No. 1715.

Published by DAW Books, Inc.
375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014.

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eBook ISBN 978-0-698-15199-4



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Version_1

To Amy. I couldn't do this without your love,
patience, and support.

Contents

[Also By Jim C. Hines](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Bibliography](#)

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BOOK FOUR

JIM C. HINES



DAW BOOKS, INC.

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, FOUNDER

375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

ELIZABETH R. WOLLHEIM

SHEILA E. GILBERT

PUBLISHERS

www.dawbooks.com

Author's Note

Attention! When your name is called, please stand to receive your acknowledgment and gratitude. I've got a lot of people to thank, and there's a story to get to, so let's keep things moving.

- Sheila Gilbert—for editorial services above and beyond the call of duty, and for helping to make this and every other book I've written for DAW better.
- Joshua Bilmes and the JABberwocky crew—for meritorious agenting and helping me make a career from this writing thing.
- Gene Mollica—for bringing Isaac and Lena (and Smudge!) together on an amazing cover.
- Amy, Skylar, and Jamie—for surviving one of the most hazardous environments known to humanity: the home of a writer struggling to make a deadline. Thank you so much for putting up with me.
- Myke Cole—for teaching me how to break into a Coast Guard ship. (Wait, that doesn't sound quite right . . .)
- Alistair Kimble and Diana Rowland—for offering help and advice with various law enforcement details.
- Kelly McCullough—in recognition of his repeated missions as Volunteer Beta Reader, First Class.
- Gabrielle Harbowy—for expertise and assistance in helping me (hopefully) not screw up my portrayal of Rabbi Miller and his synagogue.
- All my readers and fans—thank you more than I can say for your continued support. It means the world.

Before you start reading the story, I wanted to expand on that last bullet point. Three weeks after I turned this manuscript in to my editor, I walked out the door at my day job for good in order to focus on writing and my family.

I've dreamed about writing full-time for half my life. For a long time, I never believed it would happen. Thanks to the support of my wife and kids, as well as the enthusiasm of my readers, I have never been happier to be proven wrong.

I can't wait to begin this new chapter in my life, and I look forward to sharing new stories with you all for many years to come.

Jim C. Hirsh
August 2010

HEARING
OF THE
JOINT COMMITTEE ON MAGICAL SECURITY
BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
AND THE
U.S. SENATE

CHAIRMAN: ALEXANDER KEELER

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
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COMMITTEE ON MAGICAL SECURITY

ALEXANDER KEELER, ILLINOIS

MARY PAT CLARKE, MARYLAND

KENNETH TINDILL, RHODE ISLAND

KENT CHILDRESS, OREGON

Testimony and Questioning of Witness Number 18: Isaac Vainio

The CHAIRMAN: This hearing will come to order.

It's my privilege and honor to welcome the members of the Joint Committee on Magical Security, as well as the witnesses who have been called to testify as we help to shape the future of this great nation during this time of worldwide turmoil and conflict.

Mister Vainio, thank you for taking time from your work with New Millennium to join us today.

Mr. VAINIO: Your invitation made it clear I didn't have a choice.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you affirm that the testimony you will give before this committee is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

Mr. VAINIO: Aren't I supposed to be sworn in on a Bible?

The CHAIRMAN: For security reasons, no books will be permitted in the chamber during your testimony.

Mr. VAINIO: Don't worry, I'm not about to try libriomancy with a Bible, or any other religious text. Gutenberg might have been able to handle that kind of intensity and belief, but—oh, sorry. Yes, I do so affirm.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you. You may be seated. Mr. Vainio, would you please—what is that?

Mr. VAINIO: His name is Smudge. He's a fire-spider. He's perfectly safe as long as he's in his cage. Don't go poking your fingers in there, though. He's my service animal. My lawyer advised me this was permitted under disability law.

Mr. CHILDRESS: You have a service spider?

Mr. VAINIO: He senses danger. Like Spider-Man. Having him around helps me with some . . . anxiety issues. It's been a traumatic few years. I have a letter from my therapist if you'd like to see it.

The CHAIRMAN: That won't be necessary. For the record, please state your history and current role with the organization known as the Porters.

Mr. VAINIO: I've been a member of the Porters—intermittently—for about seven years, working to protect the world from magical threats. I've been a cataloguer, field agent, and researcher. Ten months back, I helped to found the New Millennium project in Nevada, where I currently work as Director of Research and Development.

The CHAIRMAN: Ten months. That would be shortly after you announced the existence of magic to the world.

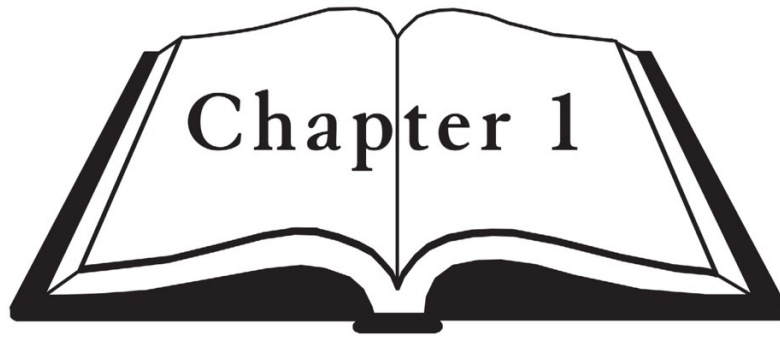
Mr. VAINIO: Correct.

The CHAIRMAN: You constructed New Millennium in the United States. You yourself are an American citizen, born and raised in Michigan. Are you loyal to this country, Isaac?

Mr. VAINIO: How do you mean?

The CHAIRMAN: There are hundreds of you libromancers scattered throughout the world, and thousands of other creatures. Vampires and merfolk and werewolves and bigfoots and Heaven knows what else. What assurances does this committee have that you won't turn against the United States of America? How do we prevent people like you from selling your abilities to the highest bidder?

Mr. VAINIO: Maybe you could start by not treating us all like potential criminals and terrorists.



Chapter 1

“You didn’t think this would be easy, did you?”

“I knew there’d be conflict. Fear. And yah, violence too.”

“You’re mincing words. The world is headed for war.”

“Humanity has been at war for more than ninety percent of recorded history.”

“Not like this. What you’ve seen over this past year is only the beginning. The warm-up act, if you will.”

“Says you. Not even magic can see the future.”

“Not magic. Experience. I watched humanity for centuries. They fear you. Humanity works to control what it fears, and to destroy what it can’t control.”

“You’re a pessimist. Also an asshole.”

“Neither of those facts changes the truth. Your actions helped bring the world to this precipice.”

“And yours didn’t?”

“They did, but let’s be pragmatic, shall we? Of the two of us, only one is in a position to affect current events.”

“One of the advantages of not being dead, eh?”



YOU’D THINK MY TIME in the field fighting everything from possessed libromancers to magically animated metal monstrosities to a thousand-year-old dead necromancer would have prepared me for an afternoon testifying before a pack of Washington politicians, but by the time I emerged, I longed for the simplicity of a rabid were-jaguar whose motivation was straightforward, foamy-jawed murder.

I ignored the reporters waiting in the hallway and made my way toward a wooden bench where Lena Greenwood sat whispering with Nicola Pallas and Nidhi Shah.

“Well?” asked Nicola.

“I understand now why a group of vultures is called a committee. I didn’t turn any of them into roaches, if that’s what you’re asking.” Though in several cases, it would have been an improvement. “Why drag us out here when they’ve already decided we’re the biggest threat to world peace since the atom bomb?”

“To show that they can.” Nidhi had been a psychiatrist for Die Zwelf Portenære, the magical—and until recently, secret—organization better known as the Porters, for as long as I’d known her. Of the four of us, she was the only one with no inherent magical abilities of her own. She got paid to keep the rest of us magic-users sane. Her job was far more challenging than my own.

She’d dressed conservatively for her testimony earlier today, in a simple black jacket and matching trousers, with a subdued blue shirt and a minimum of her usual jewelry. “And a few minds haven’t yet clamped shut. Senator Clarke supports the Porters and our work. Representatives Hays and Hoffman have spoken out against the overreactions from Homeland Security and the FBI, and Secretary McGinley at DHS has said he’d be willing to sit down with representatives from different inhuman communities.”

“Our job now is to demonstrate to the world that we’re not a threat.” A pair of white earbuds hung around Nicola’s neck like a pair of anorexic pet snakes humming a faint jazz tune. She reached into her jacket pocket, and the music died a moment later. “Be thankful it isn’t worse. The Chinese Central Military Commission charged Shin-Tsu Chang with treason last month.”

Shin-Tsu Chang and Nicola Pallas were two of the six Council Masters who had taken over the Porters after the death of Johannes Gutenberg last year. I didn’t know Nicola’s Chinese counterpart well, but I’d read and respected most of his magical research from the past two decades. “Is he safe?”

“For now,” said Nicola.

Lena took my hand as we walked down the hall. “Try to think positive. If they do decide to throw us all into internment camps, you could stop stressing about that IRS audit.”

“What’s the IRS going to do, take my house?” I snorted. My home had burned to the ground last year, and I’d been commuting between a little apartment in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula and my quarters at New Millennium ever since.

“As of this morning, they’re also suing the Porters for centuries of back taxes,” said Nicola. “One of our lawyers will be in touch with you about your options.”

“Just let me know how much pirate gold to pull out of *Treasure Island* to get them off my back.”

“It’s not that simple. Governments around the world are cracking down on magically created wealth. The Senate proposed legislation adding a minimum twenty-year sentence for magical counterfeiting. They’re worried about inflation and consumer confidence.”

“Maybe they should be worried about getting the riots under control,” I said. “Not to mention beatings, lynchings, and, oh yeah, the fact that half the world is using magic as an excuse to rekindle old wars or start new ones.”

“And the rest are preparing for the spillover,” Lena commented. “Near the end of my testimony, Senator Tindill asked what it would take for me to enlist in the Marines. Russia instituted a mandatory draft for inhumans eight months ago.”

“Along with seventeen other nations we know of.” I shook my head. “Did Tindill explain how you’re supposed to enlist if they refuse to recognize you as a citizen?”

Lena was my . . . *girlfriend* wasn’t strong enough, but the law wouldn’t allow us to be husband and wife, on account of her not being human. Lover and partner were the two words that came closest, and also accommodated Nidhi as Lena’s other romantic companion. We’d built our own little three-person family over the past few years, though the process hadn’t always been smooth. What relationship was

Lena had stopped hiding her dryad nature after the revelation of magic. Today that meant a crown of budding leaves growing directly from the skin of her brow and poking from beneath her thick hair

It gave her a playful, otherworldly air.

~~Short, plump, and dark-skinned, with endless energy and a gorgeous smile, Lena was one of only three nonhumans who had been allowed to testify. I wondered how fast they'd have crossed her off the witness list if they'd truly understood what she could do, but she didn't come across as the kind of person who could knock out a minotaur with one punch.~~

Whereas the rest of us had dressed up for the hearings, Lena wore old jeans and a black leather motorcycle jacket over a tight-fitting T-shirt of Groot and Treebeard. The caption beneath the two walking trees read, GOT WOOD?

We stopped in the lobby to give Nicola time to compose herself. As frustrating as today had been for me, these hearings and the publicity had been harder on her. As the only member of the Porter Council residing in the U.S., she'd been under more scrutiny than any of us.

New strands of silver threaded through her black hair. Her eyes were shadowed, and from the way her jacket hung on her taut shoulders, she'd lost weight. Overuse of magic could do that, but so could good old-fashioned stress. She fidgeted with a pair of silver rings on her left hand as she looked through the glass doors at the waiting crowd.

"You know, when I was younger, I *wanted* to be famous," I said, taking in the number of microphones and cameras waiting outside to pounce. "I wanted to be an astronaut, the first man on Mars. Or a scientist who discovered time travel and lived in a mansion guarded by robot sharks. Or Batman."

"Your glasses would clash with the cape and cowl," said Lena. "Besides, I'm not sure you could pull off the spandex look. I like the tie, though." She leaned closer to read the silver type printed on the black silk. "Is that new?"

"I only owned one tie, and it had burn spots." I glared at Smudge, who was resting at the bottom of a small rectangular cage clipped to my belt. A layer of fiberglass shielded me from the fire-spider's heat, though if anything set him off, there was a decent chance he'd ignite the bottom of my suit coat.

I'd ordered this particular tie online. It was custom-made with the word OOOK printed in small, diagonal stripes, a tribute to Terry Pratchett and his orangutan librarian from the Discworld books. I loosened the knot and unbuttoned my collar. "Remind me to assign someone from my team to look into time travel. I want to take a trip to the seventeenth century."

"I'll bite," said Lena. "Why?"

"The necktie supposedly originated with King Louis XIV. Thanks to him, millions of us have to walk around with a literal noose around our necks. If I go back and kill Louis, I'll never have to wear these things again."

"I'm ready." Nicola wrapped her earbuds around a small MP3 player and tucked them away in an inside pocket. "Thank you."

I squared my shoulders, feeling vulnerable and exposed without my traditional assortment of books. Today's unpleasantness wasn't over yet. What I wouldn't have given for just one paperback and the chance to pull an invisibility cloak from its pages.

Lena flexed her hands. Tiny buds sprouted from her knuckles and fingers, a pattern of green dots that made me think of henna tattoos. "Remember, the press can smell fear."

I pulled a box of orange Tic Tacs from my pants pocket, popped one into my mouth, and gave another to Smudge to keep him occupied. "All right. Let's go be famous."



Young Isaac had dreamed of fame.

Young Isaac was an idiot.

The shouts hit us like ten-foot waves as we stepped through the doors. Wooden barriers edged the sidewalk. ~~Eight uniformed D.C. police officers worked to keep the crowds back, guarding the narrow path to our waiting SUV.~~

The first person to spit at me was an older gentleman to my left, wearing a charming SALEM HAS THE RIGHT IDEA T-shirt.

Part of me wanted to point out that, according to Porter records, none of the people executed in seventeenth century Salem were actual witches or magic-users. Another part simply wanted to turn him into a pickled egg.

The four of us fell into a diamond formation with Lena at the head, while Nidhi and I walked a step behind to either side, helping to create a buffer for Nicola.

A reporter shoved a microphone over the barriers. “What are the Porters doing about magic-using rebels and mercenaries destabilizing Africa?”

“I’ve got this one.” I raised my voice. “Africa is a continent. A big one. You’ll have to be more specific. Are you talking about the libriomancer helping the government fight Boko Haram in Nigeria? The rumors about rebels in Mali using blood magic? Or do you mean the three adze who’ve been acting as vigilantes, most recently in the Ivory Coast?”

The adze in question had become known as the Diamond Fireflies after disrupting a diamond mining operation in Sierra Leone and freeing twenty-six child slaves. The vampire-like trio had also brutally murdered three overseers before transforming back into their firefly forms to escape.

I kept walking before the reporter could respond.

“Ms. Pallas, why are the Porters unwilling to defend this country?” asked another reporter.

“The Porters are a worldwide organization, founded in Germany. We have more members from India and China than we do from the U.S.” Nicola’s voice cut through the shouts like a shark through water, a trick of her bardic magic. “The Porters will continue to work with the international community to protect this world from magical threats. We will *not* support legislation to allow the selective drafting of magically gifted individuals, or any other efforts to militarize our people and our work.”

The anger wasn’t all directed at us. I spotted one small group holding signs that said JUSTICE FOR MARCUS VISSER. Visser was a young werewolf from Maine who’d been shot and killed in early September by a pair of hunters, neither of whom had been charged with any crime.

“Isaac, will you autograph my library card?” A young woman shoved a laminated card and silver Sharpie at me. I scribbled my name and returned it. A camera flash went off directly in my face.

I tried to smile, remembering the photo *USA Today* had run of me in mid-sentence with my mouth open and eyes half-shut. I’d looked like a stoned Muppet. How the hell had I gone from a small-town Michigan librarian to having to worry about paparazzi in a single year?

“Isaac, please heal our son!”

I stopped walking. A small gap opened to my right. Reporters jockeyed for a better angle.

The plea had come from a couple with a boy no more than two years old, asleep in a stroller. The parents looked to be in their mid-to-late twenties, roughly the same age as me, but in that moment I felt decades older.

“Isaac . . .” Nicola pitched her voice only for me, but that single soft-spoken word carried both warning and a history of arguments stretching back almost a year. Arguments I had generally lost.

“What’s wrong with him?” I asked, unable to stop myself.

“His name’s Caleb,” said the father. He had both hands on the wooden barrier. Two police officers moved closer, ready to intervene. “He has hypoplastic left heart syndrome. We’ve been waiting six months for a heart transplant.”

“We saw a story about you on television,” the mother added. “The Discovery Channel one. How

your team had cured cancer and diabetes in rats, regrown missing limbs, and healed broken bones. When we heard you were gonna be here, we thought . . .”

She bit her lip and fell silent. The crowd grew still, waiting for my response. Several of the police officers were listening as well. I thought I read sympathy in the eyes of one. Fear in another. A third touched the handcuffs on his belt, a not-so-subtle warning.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, hating myself for how mechanical it sounded. “We’re only beginning human trials this month, under strict supervision from the National Institutes of Health.”

They’d come hoping I’d heal their son’s heart, and instead it was like I’d reached into their chests and squeezed the life from theirs. The mother’s eyes filled with tears. The father put a hand on the stroller as if to keep from falling.

I could do what they asked. I could cure an entire ward of children of every disease known to humanity. A battered copy of *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* waited in the SUV, along with my other books. I could open the pages and pull the power of Lucy’s healing cordial into the world. A single drop, and their son would be healthy.

At which point they would be taken into federal custody, their son quarantined, and I would be arrested for violating hastily passed and ill-informed laws against using magic to “physically or mentally influence, alter, or otherwise interfere with another person.”

Most states had eventually added Good Samaritan clauses, allowing exceptions for emergencies that posed “immediate threat to life and limb,” but those didn’t apply here. I could use magic to push someone out of the path of oncoming traffic, but thanks to the fearmongering and ignorance of people like Senator Alexander Keeler, I couldn’t help a child suffering from a potentially deadly heart defect.

If they’d come to me in private, that would be one thing. But not here. Not with so many cameras, so many people, so much raw emotion waiting for a spark.

The moment they publicly asked for my help, they guaranteed I couldn’t give it. I’d bet anything that within the week, a doctor from the NIH would be stopping by their home, not to help, but to confirm their son was still critically ill. To make sure I hadn’t helped him by using “untested and unproven magical techniques that have not been fully evaluated for safety and long-term side effects.”

People had gone to jail over this fight. Libriomancers as well as doctors who’d been forced to watch patients die when the simplest magic could have saved them.

I was tempted to do the same. Save Caleb, and to hell with the consequences. Only those consequences wouldn’t stop with me. My arrest would derail every research project under my supervision, including medical research. It would also provide more ammunition to people who saw us as rebellious outsiders, people who would take any excuse to dissolve the Porters and seize full control of New Millennium.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. I pulled a business card from the inner pocket of my suit jacket. “Call this number. A woman named Kiyoko Itô handles all incoming calls. Tell her you spoke with me. I’ll try to get Caleb into the next round of medical trials at New Millennium.”

“Medical trials?” the father snapped. He pressed up against the barrier, his fists clenched. Lena shifted her balance, ready to take him down if needed. “You know how many damn medical trials we’ve been through in the past two years?”

I could guess. My niece had suffered through multiple surgeries and procedures for years, following an accident that took her leg. I’d seen how slow and tortuous the American medical system could be. I’d been fighting for the past year for the right to help her, and others like her.

The mother took my card. Tension tightened her face. Both of them were fighting tears.

Nidhi pressed past me. “Did someone tell you to come here and ask Isaac for help?” She kept her voice low enough most of the mics wouldn’t pick it up.

The father nodded. “Yeah, that’s right.”

Someone had set this family up, using their pain and desperation to stage footage of a libromancer heartlessly refusing to help a dying child.

Before Nidhi could press for information, another man shoved to the front of the crowd and shouted, “A year ago, you said magic was a gift! When you gonna share that gift with the rest of us?”

“What’s New Millennium really doing behind those walls?” yelled another. “They get fat off of our taxes, then let us die!”

New Millennium had no federal or state funding, but this wasn’t the time to point that out.

“We should go,” said Nidhi. “Now.”

Heat from the cage at my hip added to Nidhi’s warning.

Lena took my hand and pulled me toward the car. Whatever else people might have said, whatever the crowd shouted after us, it all turned to gray noise.



We were halfway to our next meeting when my phone went off. Not the smartphone in my pocket; this was a private line, known to only a dozen people, three of whom were sitting in the SUV with me.

I clenched my jaw to activate the connection. “This is Isaac.”

The communicator in my lower right molar would pick up subvocalizations almost as clearly as speech. But speaking out loud let the others know I was on a call. Also, I’d been told I sounded drunk when I subvocalized.

“She escaped again!”

I closed my eyes and gently thumped my head against the headrest. “Vince, it’s been a long day. Wherever Kerling has gone, she always comes back eventually.”

“She took half my bologna sandwich, scattered trash over my desk, stole my favorite pen, and left a feather on my printer. I think the feather was deliberate.”

“I’m two thousand miles away, Vince. I can’t help you find your missing crow.”

Beside me, Lena chuckled.

“I wired the door of her cage yesterday afternoon. If she opened the latch from the inside, it should have set off an alarm.”

Vince Hambrecht was an infectious storm of energy and enthusiasm, the first of three libromancers I’d brought onto my research team at New Millennium. His indignation at being outsmarted by a crow was tempered by his obvious delight in their ongoing game. “Maybe you should have had Talulah or Charles double-check your setup.”

“Everything was working just fine. The cameras went dead for three hours last night, right when she got out. That can’t be coincidence, Isaac. And what about the time she stole the Escape key from my keyboard? She was taunting me.”

At nineteen, Vince was the youngest researcher on site. He’d discovered his abilities a year and a half ago, and was still in that overenthusiastic phase where he was likely to blow himself up along with everyone within a hundred-foot radius if you didn’t keep a close eye on him.

Some people would say we never really outgrew that phase.

The Porters had found him working part-time at the Toronto zoo to put himself through grad school. He’d begun college at the age of fourteen, finished his undergrad at seventeen, and had just completed his veterinary coursework when Nicola recommended I bring him onto my team at New Millennium.

He’d read *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* more than forty times, trying to gain the power to speak with animals. Failing that, he’d used various other books to try to get similar abilities. Last month, he was drinking dragon blood from Mercedes Lackey’s *Tales of the Five Hundred Kingdoms* books.

Magic didn't make the animals particularly intelligent conversationalists, but for Vince, an endless litany of "Feed me!" and "Mine!" and "I'm horny!" never seemed to get old.

"I told you, I've checked Kerling twice. There's no trace of magic, aside from the healing and rejuvenation you did for her. I still think it's Talulah messing with you. Heaven save me from libromancers with too much time on their hands. How's the rest of the menagerie doing?"

His voice went soft. "*Mortimer died yesterday afternoon.*"

"I'm sorry, Vince. He was one of the rats, right?"

"*He came in three months ago with a missing tail and infected teeth. Once we healed him, he bit you on the palm.*"

"Yah, I remember."

"*Doctor Dickinson took the body. As far as I can tell, Mortimer died of old age, not anything we did. But those NIH ghouls insist on cutting him up for study. They'd better give the remains back this time. That rat deserves a proper burial.*"

"Email me a copy of Mortimer's file and your report, and let me know if the NIH finds anything unusual."

"Will do, Boss."

"Don't call me that."

"Sorry." He hesitated, then blurted, "*While I've got you on the line, could we talk about Project Crichton?*"

"We are *not* making baby dinosaurs, and that's final. The last thing we need is a bunch of juvenile velociraptors eating one of our federal babysitters."

"*They wouldn't get loose, Boss.*"

"Says the man who can't keep a little crow secure. Have you even read *Jurassic Park*?" Our SUV pulled into a parking lot on 8th Street. "I've got to go. Remind me when I get back, and we can try putting a tracking spell on Kerling."

Lena was smirking when I hung up. "Vince versus the crow again? What is this, round eight?"

"At least." I climbed out of the SUV and grabbed my old duster from the back, not caring how badly the battered leather jacket clashed with my suit and tie. The reassuring weight of the books in their various customized pockets was more important than any fashion faux pas.

"When are you planning to tell him you uplifted Kerling's intelligence?" Lena asked.

"When it stops being funny."

"You shouldn't interfere with New Millennium research projects," said Nicola.

"I'm not. I've been keeping detailed notes on Kerling's progress. And Vince's." I raised my hands as if to ward off an assault. "The particular magic I used on Kerling could have all kinds of implications for healing brain damage and mental incapacity, not to mention boosting intelligence in general. It's a legit project, I promise."

Lena smiled. "You light up when you talk about that place. It's a shame you couldn't get them to build it in the U.P."

Michigan's Upper Peninsula would have been an ideal location, with plenty of open land away from populated areas. We also had a healthy werewolf pack, and I'd hoped we could hire some of them for security and other positions. I'd gone to Lansing to push the potential job creation and publicity benefits, but Governor Sullivan was firmly in the anti-magic camp, as was much of the state legislature. I'd hardly left the capitol building before they were passing bills prohibiting magical research in Michigan.

"There's so much we could learn, so much to do. Medicine, engineering, archaeology, astronomy . . . I'm close to getting a meeting with NASA about a permanent magical portal to the moon!"

She laughed and kissed me. “Almost makes the politics worth it.”

The politics were the second worst part of my job, right below having to leave Lena for weeks at a time. She’d been out to visit, but Lena was a dryad. Her oak tree was still rooted in Michigan, as was her other lover. She carried part of that tree within herself, allowing her greater freedom, but she still had to return home at least once a week.

“Before you go to the moon, how about one of those portals between Vegas and Copper River, hm?”

“It’s at the top of my To Do List,” I promised.

She laughed again—I loved that sound—and took my hand as we walked into the restaurant. Tension knotted my muscles like Christmas lights after a year in storage, but being with Lena helped. She had a gift for finding joy and beauty, and for helping others to remember those things.

The Square Pie Pizzeria was one of the more upscale D.C. restaurants, complete with candles and white tablecloths and wait staff in black bow ties. More importantly, they provided privacy and damn good pizza. Lena, Nidhi, and I had come here at least once on each of our too-frequent trips. Nicola had reserved a small, private room near the back.

Representative Derek Vaughn looked to have arrived only moments before. He finished removing his jacket, then waited politely while the rest of us took our seats. Once the waiter jotted down our drink orders and left, shutting the door behind him, Vaughn leaned over to kiss Nicola hello.

“Hell of a day.” Weariness dulled his vote-winning smile. “I thought that hearing would never end.” Thanks to his New Orleans accent, it came out *Ah thought dat hearin’ would nevu end.*

As I understood it, he and Nicola had met after a committee hearing in early August. A few weeks later, he’d taken her to one of the best jazz bars in D.C. It was love at first song. How he and Nicola had kept their relationship a secret from the media and the Joint Magical Committee these past two months was a whole other kind of magic.

I unclipped Smudge’s cage and set it on the table between Vaughn and myself. Smudge perked up and poked his forelegs through the bar. He knew this place, and had developed an appetite for anchovies.

“What do you think?” Nicola asked, without preamble.

Vaughn sipped his water before answering. He was an intelligent, quick-witted man who’d started out as a public defender. His ruffled graying hair and gentle blue eyes, framed by laugh lines and silver-rimmed glasses, tended to make people underestimate him. “Hard to say. Homeland Security is pushing hard to get more of you Porters on the payroll. People are scared, Nic. They want guarantees that some voodoo curse won’t turn New York City into a graveyard, or a vampire won’t mind-rape the president into launching nukes at his own country.”

“Voodoo is a religion, not a school of magic,” I pointed out. Though technically, enough authors had written about voodoo dolls to make them a viable tool for libromancers to pull out of books.

“I know that, boy.” Vaughn took another drink. “Point is, they think you’re holding back. A lot of folks want all of you Porters rounded up, along with the vampires, werewolves, and the rest. Dryads, too, I’m afraid.”

Lena smiled. “They’re welcome to try.”

“I haven’t seen things this tense since the Cold War,” he went on. “Folks think World War III is coming, and when it arrives, it’s gonna fly in on broomsticks, waving wands and massacring muggles.”

“The world’s doing the best it can to make it happen,” I snapped. “North Korea is mandating everyone read one government-approved novel each month, trying to build up a library of magical weapons. Here in the States, Senator Keeler wants us to help him turn hundreds of soldiers into vampires. China detonated a fucking nuke trying to get to the Students of Bi Sheng.”

Vaughn's eyes narrowed. "How do you know that?"

"Because I have friends there." The Students of Bi Sheng were a small group of survivors from five hundred years ago, practitioners of an alternate form of libromancy. They'd fought a magical war once before, and were determined to stay out of world events. There were days I'd been tempted to join them.

"Best not mention that to the committee," said Vaughn. "Last I checked, the Porters weren't exactly innocent in this whole mess. Look at all those casualties from your battle in Copper River. What about the victims of rogue weres and vamps and all the rest? Like that fellow you told me about the one in the U.P. who fed on Boy Scouts?"

"He hasn't touched a child since the day I put a bomb in his skull. I'm not saying we ignore killer but—"

"Did you hear what you just said, Isaac?" Derek let out a long, slow breath that smelled faintly of pipe smoke. "You put a bomb in that fellow's head. You Porters were judges and executioners, and people know it. Fact is, you *are* dangerous."

"Of course we're dangerous. So are you. So is every paranoid, trigger-happy idiot ordering vampire-hunting kits off e-Bay or melting antique candlesticks to make silver bullets. You know what's more dangerous? Entire nations doing the same damn thing." I raised a hand before he could argue. "You're right, the Porters screwed up sometimes. I screwed up. I also saved a lot of lives, and we could save a hell of a lot more if people would just let us. There are kids dying out there, Derek. People who need our help. We can't fix everything, but we can do so much better than we are right now, and all anyone wants to do is talk about preemptive magical strikes and how many people they can kill with the next libromantic superweapon."

"What do you suggest?" he asked. "Should we abandon national defense, let you run off to produce your magical rainbows and unicorns, and wait for some genie from the Middle East to wish the American people into turnips?"

"That's not how genies work, you ignorant—"

"Isaac." Nidhi spoke quietly, making me realize how loud I was getting.

I sat back, pulled off my glasses, and rubbed my eyes. "I'm sorry. I know you're trying to navigate this mess the best you can, but it's not enough."

"You think I don't know that? You get to go home to Vegas to play in your lab. I have to jump back into that snake pit every day." He sounded as tired as I felt. "How's Lex doing?"

Vaughn had an excellent memory for people, and never failed to ask about my niece. "She's excited. Nervous, too, but mostly impatient to be done. I'll be flying back to Vegas later tonight so I can be there for her procedure."

"We need more success stories like hers," said Vaughn. "Show the world how magic restored a little girl's leg."

"We could have showed the world a year ago," I pointed out.

"Isaac, you know this has to be done by the book. If there's the slightest possibility of things going wrong, you could do more harm than good."

"Tell that to Lex and her parents."

Before he could answer, Nicola's cellphone buzzed on the table, playing the opening bars of a Harry Connick Jr. song.

"Excuse me." She picked up the phone and turned away.

Vaughn's phone went off a moment later. My hands clenched. I hoped it was coincidence, but I wasn't surprised when my own communicator chimed to signal an incoming call.

"*This is Isaac. What happened?*"

"*It's Talulah. New Millennium is on lockdown. Have you seen the news?*"

“Not yet.” I looked around the table. Nicola was a statue, sitting with deliberate stillness as she listened. Vaughn’s face had gone red, and he was swearing under his breath.

“They’re reporting multiple attacks by inhuman terrorists.”

“How many, and where?” I asked.

“At least four.” Talulah hesitated. “Including one in Lansing. Michigan’s governor is in critical condition. Similar attacks were launched simultaneously in California, Oklahoma, and New York.”

I felt like I’d swallowed a twenty-ounce bottle of battery acid. I stood and grabbed Smudge’s cage clipping it to my belt with an aluminum carabineer.

Nicola covered her phone. “Go. Help the wounded, and assist the police.”

“Isaac,” said Vaughn. “Make yourself visible.”

I grimaced. In other words, play nice for the cameras and put on a good public relations face for the Porters. I hated this part of my job, but he was right. Especially if these attacks had been carried out by nonhumans.

“How long will it take you to get to Michigan?” asked Nicola.

“Five minutes.” I donned my jacket and hurried toward the door, Lena and Nidhi close behind.

No matter how quickly we arrived, no matter how much we helped, part of me was starting to believe it would never be enough.

From: donotreply@porterbot.net

To: ivainio@newmillennium.org

Subject: Catalog Reservations

Hello Isaac,

This is an automated reminder from the Porter Databots.

We noticed you have an unusually large number of titles reserved in the Porter catalog. While we appreciate your diligence in helping to minimize overuse and magical charring, we wonder if maybe you've forgotten to release some of those 184 books back into circulation for use by other Porter researchers and field agents.

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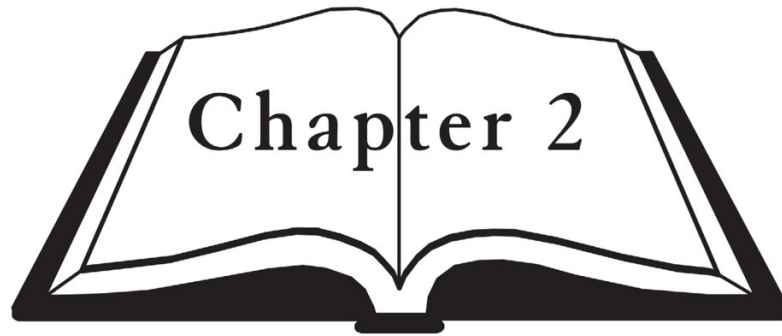
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Thanks!

Titles Checked out by Isaac Vainio, User #M3714:

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2. L'Engle, Madeline. *A Wrinkle in Time*.
3. Pierce, Tamora. *In the Hand of the Goddess*.
4. Carroll, Lewis. *Through the Looking Glass*.
5. Goodkind, Terry. *Debt of Bones*.
6. Gabaldon, Diana. *Outlander*.
7. Homer. *The Odyssey*.
8. Gaiman, Neil. *Neverwhere*.
9. Donaldson, Stephen. *The Mirror of Her Dreams*.
10. Valente, Catherynne. *Palimpsest*.

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"I thought you'd made plans for all this."

"There have always been contingency plans for the revelation of magic, as well as for my own death."

"What happened? Did you forget to share those plans with anyone else?"

"To paraphrase Von Moltke, no plan survives beyond the first encounter with the enemy. I left the Porters with certain goals and strategies. Proper disposal of my body, for one. Delegation of power to a small group, no more than six. The importance of international neutrality. The safety and security of our own people. Most importantly, a focus on the long term that should help us all survive the short-term chaos and upheaval."

"Define 'short-term.'"

"Historically speaking? Years. Decades, most likely."

"How many people are going to lose their lives as a result of that chaos?"

"As you've said, magic can't predict the future."

"It can damn well guess."

"By my estimate, given human nature? Millions."



THE SERVICE THE PORTERS WERE USING for transportation and security in D.C. wasn't scheduled to pick us up for at least another hour, so Lena hailed us a cab while I took a copy of Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* from my jacket.

"Where to?" asked the driver, an older woman in a yellow headscarf with the gruff voice of a longtime smoker.

I scooted into the back and handed her a ten. "Just keep it parked here for a minute, eh?"

"You waiting for someone?"

“Not exactly.”

Lena sat down beside me. “Shortcut?”

“I hope so.” *Neverwhere* was one of the books I’d been rereading as part of my own research. I might not be able to create a stable portal from Vegas to the U.P. yet, but I was getting closer, and I’d learned a few tricks in the process.

I’d also accidentally sent a pair of lab rats to either Alpha Centauri or possibly a wardrobe in London. I doubted Vince would ever forgive me for that one.

I turned to a page marked with a blue Post-it note. I could recite the scene from memory, but it was simpler to touch the book directly, to reread and submerge myself in the story. Every page had its own texture, as unique as a fingerprint. I could feel the individual letters and the ink pressed into the paper like a blind man reading embossed print in the days before Braille.

Gaiman had created a character named Door. I’d experimented with her magic back at the lab. This would be my first time using it in the field.

My fingertips sank through the paper, touching the world so many of Gaiman’s readers had visualized and dreamed about. While that world was fictional, the belief and imagination of his readers was quite real. That was where the story’s true magic came from, with the physical book serving as a magnet and anchor for that cumulative belief.

The driver twisted around. “What are you doing back there?”

“We’ll be on our way in a moment,” said Nidhi.

Libriomancy in its most common form allowed us to grasp an object from a story and pull it into the world, transforming belief and potential magical energy into physical reality. Assuming said object would fit through the pages.

If that was 101-level libriomancy, what I’d been working on for the past year was post-graduate work.

My vision blurred, like I’d been reading too long in poor light. My mother used to tell me I’d ruin my eyes that way. As it turned out, she hadn’t been entirely wrong.

I yanked off my glasses and slipped them into my shirt pocket. The spots of shadow floating around the edges of my vision grew worse, but the book’s text sharpened. The damage to my eyes was a result of magical charring, and behaved similarly to early cataracts. Glasses helped me to compensate, but paradoxically made it harder for me to truly see magic.

I’d tried to heal the damage, but the scars weren’t physical. Magic simply flowed around the charring, like a stream past rocks.

I reached deeper into the book. My hand touched Door’s back. Rather, the composite imagination of Door’s back. I wasn’t truly touching the outline of her shoulder blades, or feeling the faint beating of her heart. I was touching readers’ belief. Belief in the character, and belief in her particular ability.

“Our driver’s getting twitchy,” Lena commented.

“I’m almost done.” From here, I could have plucked an object from Door’s hand and created it in my own. Instead of pulling anything physical from the page, I grasped Door’s ability and drew it into my body. Lines of text crept up my skin. In essence, I was making myself an extension of the book.

This kind of libriomancy carried two significant risks. For one thing, the magic came from a fictional universe. Any portal I created would want to connect to that nonexistent universe. If I screwed up, we’d be lucky to find ourselves lost in the sewers of London. If we were unlucky, the magic would try to send us into Gaiman’s fictionalized London.

Since that world didn’t exist, it would just kill us instead.

Then there was the danger of letting a book get into your head. As the story flowed through my blood, I began to hear the characters calling me. When I looked around, it was as though the fictional world had been overlaid with this one. I saw our driver staring at my truncated arm, watched her

mouth move, but I heard the murmurs of the London crowd, saw tunnels and subway lines passing through the cab, smelled the damp fog . . .

“Isaac?” Lena touched my neck, helping ground me in the real world.

I placed my other hand on the inside of the cab’s door and pushed the story through me, into the metal and plastic of the car. The words were like a windstorm trying to escape, trying to create a gateway back to their book.

I forced them instead to a place I knew well enough to anchor my thoughts against the fragments of *Neverwhere* swirling around me like a maelstrom. “It’s like herding cats across a river.”

“I can call Nicola if you need help,” said Nidhi.

“No, I’ve got it. Probably.” I pushed the last of the text into place and opened the door. When I climbed out, I emerged from the back of a pizza delivery car parked on the side of a very different road.

Had Gutenberg been alive, I’m sure he would have cast this spell without a second thought, putting us down on the front steps of the capitol building. Given another five hundred years of practice, I like to think I’d have done the same.

“What the hell are you doing?” The shout came from a young woman across the road, carrying an empty red delivery bag. “Get out of my car!”

“Sorry!” I stumbled away from the car, shoved *Neverwhere* into my jacket pocket, and checked on Smudge. He didn’t look happy, but he wasn’t about to set anything on fire either, which meant the driver probably wasn’t going to pull a gun and shoot me just yet. I glanced around. I’d put us down in East Lansing, on the campus of Michigan State University. “Technically, we weren’t in your car. We just—”

“What do you mean ‘we’?” She hurried across the road and pushed past me to check the back seat which was empty. She tossed the delivery bag into the back, aimed her cellphone at my face, and snapped a picture before dialing what I assumed was the police. “What did you take, asshole?”

“Nothing,” said Lena as she emerged from the car.

The poor woman jumped so hard she dropped her phone. Lena caught it before it hit the pavement.

I flexed my hand. The fingertips were a bit numb, but I saw no sign of charring. I checked the magnetic sign on the top of the car. “Georgio’s, eh? I used to eat there all the time when I was an undergrad.” I pulled out my wallet and handed her a twenty. “I’m sorry we scared you. Consider this part of your tip for the night?”

She stared at me, then at the car, where Nidhi now appeared to be climbing out of nothingness. “That’s . . . that’s magic.”

“Pretty cool, isn’t it? If I had more time, I’d tell you how it worked.”

“He would,” Lena said. “Even if you asked him to stop.”

I pointed to the three-story brick building across the street. “That’s Mason-Abbot Hall, which put us on the northeast corner of campus, about ten miles from Lansing.” I turned back to the delivery driver. “How’d you like to make a bigger tip?”



“If traffic doesn’t pick up soon, I’m going to fly the rest of the way,” I muttered.

“You can do that?” Our impromptu driver’s name was Callie, a second-year communications major who had agreed to drive us into Lansing only after getting a selfie with Lena, and another with Smudge.

“I can. The FAA gets cranky about it, though.”

Callie swerved into another lane, then slammed the brakes. “Shit. Sorry. I knew they’d closed 496

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