

W°NDER CITY ST°RIES

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EPISODE #80

COVERED WITH PROUD SCARS

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COVERED WITH PROUD SCARS

Ira reached for the screen door that opened into Madame's kitchen and heard voices at a little distance—probably in the dining room, he guessed. He couldn't help hearing the details, since the inner kitchen door was open for the summer breeze, in Madame's usual style of resisting air conditioning.

"That's a very condescending thing to say," Madame said, her voice betraying more than a little anger.

"I'm only trying to help you," a gravelly woman's voice replied. Ira recognized the slight Midwestern twang as belonging to Juniper Wolf, Madame's new girlfriend. "I've got a lot more mileage in being gay than you do."

"*Do* you?" Madame said, offended. "How do you know that?"

"Well, you're only just coming out..." Juniper began.

"*Am* I? Or do you only think that because I only just came out to *you*?"

"I don't know," Juniper growled. "Maybe if you actually answered questions instead of answering WITH questions all the time, I'd know!"

"I realized I was queer in the 1960s," Madame said levelly. "I figured out I was bisexual in the 1980s. I told a few people. Just because I happened to be celibate doesn't mean I wasn't *thinking* about my identity *or* feeling desire."

"Well, how was I to know?" Juniper said. "Look, it's just..."

"That you think you know better than me," Madame said.

"All right, fine," Juniper said. "If you're going to make me the villain here..."

Madame's voice softened. "I'm not making you the villain. I'm trying to tell you that I'm sixty-eight years old and I've had a few years to think about things. Really, to do nothing

BUT think about things. 'Treating me like a callow maid who doesn't know her own mind is condescending and unkind."

"I... I'm sorry," Juniper said grudgingly.

And then Madame's voice grew edges. "Speaking of lecturing callow youth, it would be a favor to me if you would stop lecturing my protege on zir identity."

Juniper sighed. "That's such a stupid word."

"What, identity?"

"Zir!" Juniper said. "Zim, zir, zu, zee, zip-a-dee-doo-dah. What's wrong with real pronouns?"

"In case you haven't noticed," Madame said dryly, "English hasn't got a nongendered pronoun."

"Why does she need it anyway?" Juniper said, and Ira could hear her pacing around. "What's wrong with 'she'?"

"Zie doesn't *feel* like a 'she'," Madame said in a slowly and carefully enunciated way. "Or a 'he'. And it's none of my business, or your business, or *anyone's* business what words zie chooses to use to describe zirsself."

"See, this is why I think she's bad for you..." Juniper began.

"Zie'," Madame said.

"Whatever," Juniper said. "This kid has brought that whole 'queer' thing into your head, instead of..."

"Instead of your binary," Madame said tiredly. "You know, I've had this exact discussion about X several times, but there's never been anyone around who was rude enough to lecture *zir* about it. How, exactly, does zir choice of pronouns or identity hurt *you* enough that you have to harass zir?"

"She told you, huh?" Juniper said.

Madame exhaled a sharp sigh, and then said, "Please leave. No. No. I won't have this intolerance under my roof. If you can't be civil enough to acquiesce to a simple request to use my protege's chosen pronouns, I can't count on you to do... anything really. Please don't come back, unless, against all odds, you rethink your whole point of view."

Ira backed off the kitchen stairs guiltily as he heard Juniper's angry footsteps heading his way. He did his best to look like he'd only just arrived when she stormed out the door, looking nothing at all like the lean, muscled woman he remembered from thirty years before: slightly shaggy graying brown hair cropped to the nape of her neck, body thin and jagged around her bones, wearing a purple batik shirt and matching pants that sort of hung on her like they'd hang on a clothes hanger. She almost cannoned into him, but changed direction just in time to avoid him, grunting in a way he chose to interpret as apologetic. He pretended not to know who she was.

He watched her climb into the battered old tan Toyota at the curb and drive off. When he turned back to the kitchen door, Madame stood at the screen, watching as well. She smiled down at him. "Come on in." She opened the door and beckoned.

Ira followed her into the comfortable little kitchen. "Are you all right?" he asked carefully.

Madame shot him a brilliant smile as she opened the refrigerator. She was wearing sweatpants and a faded t-shirt with her logo on it, and a red kerchief over her greying hair — he suspected she'd been cleaning the house. "You know what? I am. I expect you heard at least some of that. Want iced tea?"

"Some, yes," he said. "Is it decaf? The ticker, you know."

"Oh, I've got herbal," she said, producing a plastic pitcher of red tea. "I feel *great* actually. Do you know, Ira, that's the first time *I've* gotten to break up with someone else?" She partly filled a glass with ice cubes from the refrigerator door, then topped up with the red tea. "I've always been the one getting dumped, and I was always so grateful to anyone willing to date me for longer than the first date that I put up with positively *anything*." Madame handed the glass to Ira. "Come on, downstairs is cooler."

They went down into her consultation room, which was usually curtained and cozy, but since the heat had really set in, she'd turned it into a wide-open room with fans, a comfortable sofa and chairs, and a large-screen television. The Forgottens had had their last several meetings there, drinking iced tea and lemonade and talking about revolution.

"How are you, then?" Madame said, flumphing down into her favorite chair. "How is Andrea?"

"I'm feeling pretty good for a guy who nearly died a month ago," he said. "And I haven't had a chance to thank you for your part in that. Without you, they couldn't have done the initial surgery."

Madame waved it off. "It was nothing. I've got a power and it's nice to have a very direct way to use it sometimes. And of *course* I'd use it for you."

Ira smiled. "You're too modest, Madame. I'm glad you remember that you're so much more than just a carrier for the Oracle."

"I worked hard to be more," she said, glancing away at the wall in a slightly sad way. "Juniper helped with that all those years ago. I'm sorry things turned out this way."

Ira wasn't sure where to go with that, and said, "As for Andrea, she's just fine. Back to exercising at the Y and everything. She's even teaching a swim class for old ladies, as she puts it. It's Suzanne I'm worried about now."

"Is she going to the counselor Pearl suggested?" Madame said, seemingly glad to be distracted, for all her protests that she was fine.

"I think so," he said. "And she sent me email to let me know she'd gotten a new job. I guess she lost the old one when she got pulled into that cult. She's not managing software projects any more, she's writing press releases and stuff like that."

"Sounds good for her," Madame said with a nod.

"She's just so alone," he said. "Andrea and I have talked, of course. She... Andrea I mean... asked me to stay at her place. So I guess I'm officially shacking up now." He gave her his prize-winning smile, and Madame returned it with a hand to her heart.

"I'm so happy for you two, Ira," she said. "But, yes, I see that Suzanne is very alone in that house. With all that history and all."

"Yeah," he said, noticing that he was wringing his hands a bit and forcing himself to pick up his glass. "I... I've been trying to convince her to talk to Simon... try to work it out. She was so *happy* with him, Madame."

"That's all you can do, sadly, my dear," Madame said, leaning over to pat his knee. "She has to save herself."

"Could you... maybe..." Ira paused, feeling silly. "Just pull a card to see how it's going to go?"

Madame beamed like a happy cat. "Of course, Ira." She reached into the drawer of the endtable and produced a Tarot deck. Just like Madame, Ira reflected, to have a deck in easy reach at all times.

She shuffled expertly, and he reflected on how odd it was to see her doing that without any rings or bracelets on. That just solidified his suspicion of housecleaning.

Madame flipped a single card out onto the coffeetable. It showed a woman in full golden armor, with a helmet of Grecian styling, with a tongue of metal over the nose and a prominent central ridge over the crown of the head. The woman was blocky and muscular, and held a great golden shield adorned with a hideous, snarling face in the center. Ira recognized the costume: the Aegis, one of the superheroines of World War 2.

"Wheel of Fortune," Madame said, touching the card, then looking up to meet his gaze. "It all depends on her."