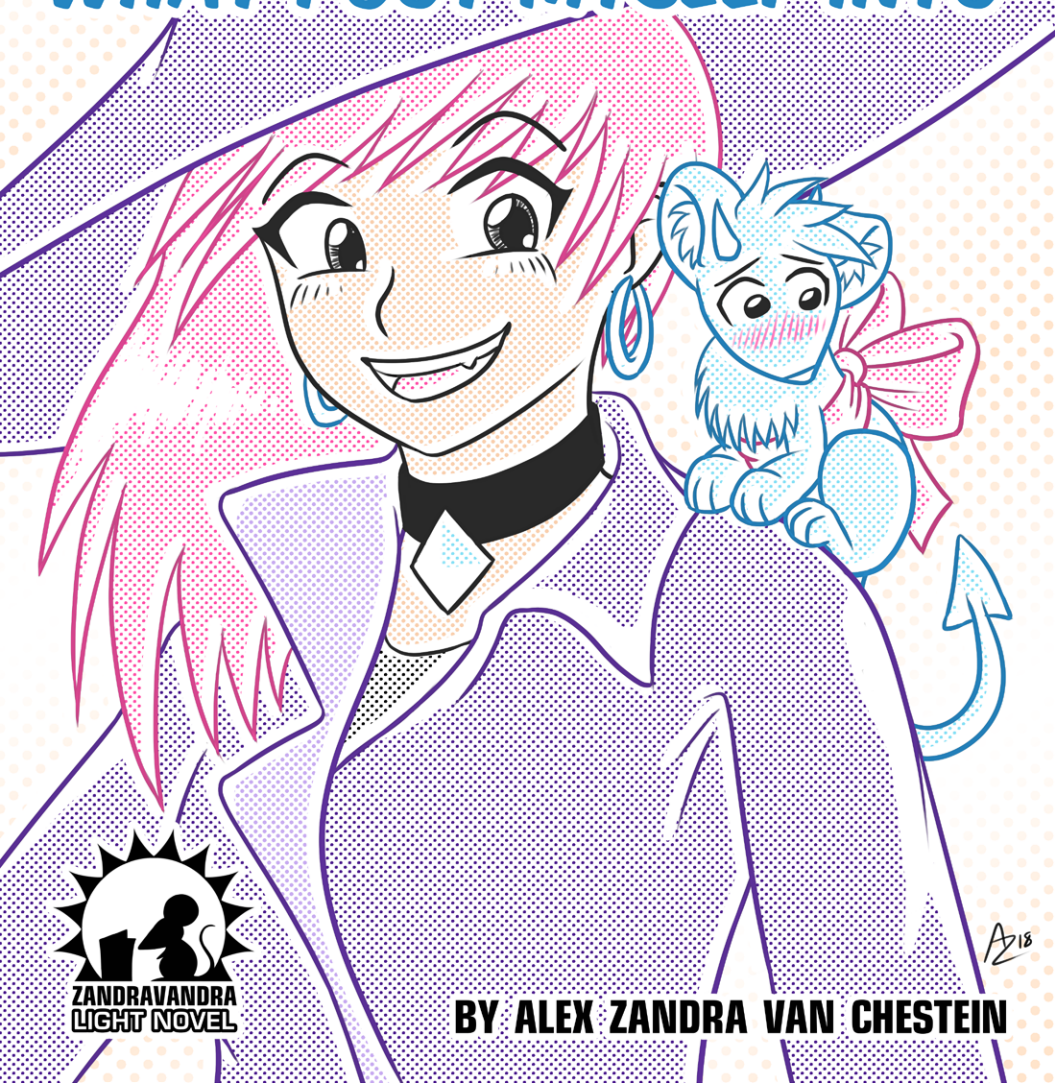


**I SIGNED UP TO BE THE
SUBSTITUTE FAMILIAR
OF A STRUGGLING WITCH
TO PAY MY BILLS AND I'M
JUST NOW REALIZING
WHAT I GOT MYSELF INTO**



BY ALEX ZANDRA VAN CHESTEIN

**Three months,
room and board,
all outstanding bills
taken care of.
Complimentary
magical aptitude.**

Absolutely no catch.

Becoming a witch takes a lot of hard work, and not everyone has the resources to devote themselves to such a grueling process. But thankfully, magic isn't completely unattainable! Witches need familiars in order to thrive, and sometimes the best candidate for the job is in the neighborhood instead of through a portal to the otherworld.

But what happens when you try on a new life and realize it fits you better than your old one? What do you do when it comes with an expiration date?

Substitute Familiar is the most worldbuilding-heavy light novel I've written yet, depicting a modern world with magic, demons, and folks trying to make it work. It's about getting the chance to try something you've wanted to do for a long time, and all the unforeseen consequences that come with it. It also has a lot of self-actualization, girls kissing girls, and gender feels, because that's what I do!

Please enjoy, and let's keep making wonderful things together. ♥

—Alex Zandra



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I Signed Up To Be The Substitute Familiar Of A Struggling Witch To Pay My Bills And I'm Just Now Realizing What I Got Myself Into

by Alex Zandra Van Chestein

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The Interview

The coffee shop door swung out unexpectedly, barely giving M enough time to step out of the way. Drenched and demoralized from the rainy walk over, he was about to say something, but when he looked up at the offending party, he found himself unable to speak. A demon stepped outside, holding the door open for a woman in a large pointed hat whose attention was wholly devoted to her smartphone. Neither seemed to notice him.

"Thank you," the witch said with a smile, eyes glued to her phone.

"Mm," the demon gently replied. Her curled horns began to glow red, contrasting with the dark purple of her skin.

M could feel a sudden wave of heat wash over him; not unpleasant, but reaching right through his thick hoodie as if it was made of tissue paper. He looked at the pair. Raindrops no longer reached them, moisture fizzling out into steam in a wide dome around the demon. He watched as they held hands and walked off, taking the comforting heat with them.

It was getting cold and wet again. M snapped out of his reverie and made his way inside.

"Hey M!" a patron called out, waving him over with a big grin.

"Hey Leslie," M said as he walked over, taking off his damp hoodie to let it dry on the back of his chair. "Sorry I'm late," he said, glancing back at the door, "there was a, uh..." His voice trailed off. He turned back to his friend, suddenly processing something. "Your hair is really green."

Leslie grinned. "Yup!" they said with a gentle sway of the head, "I got it touched up somewhere special. It's kinda why I called you up, actually. You still looking for work?"

M let out a long sigh. "Yeah," he said, with the least enthusiasm possible. "My last project didn't work out, and, well... That's it. I can't afford to try anything else now; no travel, no expensive new ideas, just... get a job and pay those bills."

"Bad luck happens. I'm sure you'll bounce back," Leslie said.

M shook his head. "It's not bad luck, it's me. I just can't make anything interesting. I get ideas, but... once I get to it, there's nothing there, and I give up. Story of my life."

"You could go back to school," Leslie said, bending down to try and catch M's gaze.

"No, I can't," M said flatly as he looked Leslie in the eye. "I don't even want to look at another test or textbook. I went back once, I'm not going back again."

"Not even for magic?" Leslie asked with an optimistic smirk.

M paused. "It's..." he began to say, trailing off again. His gaze drifted around the coffee shop, trying to find the words. "It's too late, Leslie. You know how long that takes. I can't be the weird newbie struggling in a class of kids ten years younger. And it's so hard! I tried already. It's not for me." He dove back into the menu, settling on a big cup of whatever he could confidently pronounce as the waiter came to take their order. He took a long sip of water, looking back at Leslie, whose smile had not faded. "You didn't ask me here to talk about school," M said.

"No I didn't," Leslie said. "I've just come from the shop of a friend of mine, an alchemist."

"An alchemist?" M said. "Like, a witch?" He looked back at the door, remembering his earlier encounter.

"Exactly a witch," Leslie said. "She makes potions—one of which will turn your hair green, for example—she sells ingredients and she knows everybody. And she's hiring!"

"But... We just went over it, I can't do magic," M said, frowning his brow.

"You don't need to," Leslie said. "She's got a ton of odd jobs on her billboard, and a lot of them don't require magical experience. Heck, some of them even require folks who don't do magic—and some of those pay really well."

"Oh. Why do they pay so well?" M asked with a raised eyebrow. "What's the catch?"

"I don't know," Leslie said with a shrug. "I think I heard that training kinda changes how you relate to magic, so maybe folks without it have some advantage? The point is, I trust her, I trust you, and hey—you've got bills to pay, she's got friends with money to burn. Seems like a good match. Plus you get to hang out with witches."

"Do they all have, uh..." M began as he looked back at the door, once again unable to finish his question.

"Big tall demon lady companions?" Leslie asked, grinning ear to ear. "Some do. Demons come in lots of shapes and sizes. I like to come to this place because they have a special menu for the more animal-like ones, so I get to see cute familiars while I relax. But you should ask Penelope; she's the magic expert, not me." The waiter returned with their coffee.

"Penelope?" M asked, taking his drink in hand.

"My friend. The owner of Penny Pots," Leslie answered before gently blowing on the surface of their drink. "I'll give you directions and let her know you're coming." Both of them took a sip.

"Thanks Leslie," M said, looking back at the door one last time.

"My pleasure," Leslie answered. "You're a good friend and you deserve good things."

"Mm," M gently replied.

The Contract

The little bell hanging over the door rang as M stepped inside the potion shop. He'd never dared get too close to places that dealt with magic—too many bitter feelings—but today he was making a change.

Penny Pots looked like a decades-old beloved neighborhood bookstore, except that the shelf space was dominated by baubles and containers of various liquids. To be fair though, there were also a lot of books. M made his way deeper into the store, careful not to touch anything. He didn't want to have to pay for anything he broke, and he wasn't entire sure there was a single inert object in there that he could trust.

He found the deserted counter after a brief search. "Hello?" he called out, but got no answer. The store's hours were clearly marked out in front; maybe the owner had just stepped into the back for a moment. Might as well browse in the meantime.

The billboard Leslie had mentioned was right there on the wall. M started to browse the various jobs and requests on display but it might as well had been written in another language. If there was anything in there he could sign up for, he'd need help to even find it. "Hello?" he called out again. Nothing.

He walked around the store a bit; it was a small maze, but a maze nonetheless. Cramped, semi-connected rooms, sometimes with display cabinets, sometimes just overflowing with... things. He couldn't make heads or tails of it, but surely this layout worked with the store's customers, or else it would've gone out of business by now. At least M found somewhere to wait: a sturdy box with trellised sides and a comfy-looking cushion on top. He sat down carefully, trying to figure out what would be an adequate amount of time to wait before calling out again.

Meowwww.

M jumped with a start. Turns out the shop had a resident cat, who was standing in front of him expectantly. "Uh, hey," M said, bending down a bit to get closer. "You're like a fluffy little panther, aren't you. Is your owner here?" He gently extended a hand as a greeting. That's what you did with cats, right? They'd sniff your hand and get used to your smell and—

Meowwwww!!!

But the cat was having none of it.

M was perplexed. "You don't like that? Uh. Are you hungry?" The cat refused to budge.

"You're sitting in her spot," the woman said as she walked into the

room, carefully maneuvering a stack of boxes to the counter.

"Oh! Oh, sorry," M said, getting to his feet and shuffling away apologetically. The cat immediately jumped up onto the cushion and curled up. "You're Penelope?" he asked, following the woman back through the shop.

"And you must be M," she said, putting the boxes down and taking her place behind the counter. "Welcome to Penny Pots! Sorry about letting you fend for yourself there, I was taking care of some things. Most everybody who comes here are regulars who prefer self-serve."

"Ah, that's okay," M said, scratching the back of his head. "Leslie sent me?"

"Yeah, they called ahead," Penelope said as she undid her long red ponytail, shaking her hair free. "Ahh, better. So," she continued, putting her hands down on the counter and giving M a slight satisfied smile, "you're here for the room and board job."

"Uh, yeah," M said, looking back at the billboard. "I couldn't really find it on the... wait, room and board?"

"That's because it's not on there," Penelope said. "It's kind of a special request. You've never had any magical training, right?"

"Uh, no," M replied a little too quickly. "Well," he added with some hesitation, "kinda. I went to magic school for a little bit. Nothing worked, and my mom was allergic, so I couldn't bring anything home. I dropped out pretty quickly."

"A magic allergy?" Penelope asked, her eyes narrowing. "Hereditary?"

M shook his head. "No, no, it's... we all got checked, I'm fine. It's a one-off thing."

"I see," the witch said, "good, good. Ever been to a council meeting?"

M blinked. "There's a council?" he asked.

"That's fine, don't worry about it," Penelope said, her smile returning. "Alright, let me fill you in." She nonchalantly twirled her hand in the air and then, in one fluid motion, reached forward, closed her hand into a fist and pulled back.

Clack!

M jumped, looking back at the front door, where the sound had come from. Had... had the witch just locked the door? The 'open' sign swung to and fro, spinning lazily from the wind or the shockwave or whatever it was that had moved the deadbolt into place, coming to a stop with the 'closed' side facing out the window. Penelope sat down in the tall chair behind the counter, leaning back.

"So," the witch began, her smile growing into a grin, "what do you know about familiars?"

"Uh, not a lot," M answered. "They're demons? Sometimes big, with horns?"

"Demons are demons," Penelope said, "but when they make a pact

with a witch, they become their familiar. It's a mutually beneficial bond; both gain something from it. The demon gets a worry-free anchor to this world. The witch gains a very important companion that can help them with most of the magic they'll be doing their whole life; it's a real steep hill to climb alone."

"So every witch needs one," M said.

"Pretty much!" the witch said. "Which brings me to the job. I know a young witch; bless her heart, she's really trying. But she needs a familiar to get further, and she's just not getting any success with... well, any part of the process. She can't quite sense beyond this plane, she can't get a summoning circle to reach far enough, and, well... I wouldn't leave her alone in a room with an unbound demon. It's a chicken-and-egg situation; she needs more experience to have a familiar, but to get more experience she needs a familiar. Ideal scenario? She gets a temporary familiar that can get her to the point where she can summon one on her own."

There was silence. "I see," M said after a few moments, wondering if this was some sort of test. Was he supposed to add anything? He was getting uncomfortable. "So can you... help with that?"

"Not directly," Penelope answered. "She can't know I'm helping, it'd defeat the whole purpose. But I can set up that ideal scenario behind-the-scenes; she tries to summon one again, I intercept her circle, and direct it to a safe spot in my lab. All I need is an agreeable demon to stand there."

"O...kay," M said, furrowing his brow. It felt like the witch was implying something but he just wasn't getting it. "I'm sorry, I'm just totally lost here. What do you need me to do here?"

Penelope reached down and set a glass bottle down on the counter with a heavy *thud*. It was filled with a maelstrom of purple and black in liquid form. She looked him in the eye. "I need you to stand in a safe spot in my lab," she said, "and drink this."

M's eyes went wide. "Uh, um," he sputtered, "wait. What's... what's that gonna do?"

"Exactly what you think it will," Penelope answered.

"But... what? Why me? Can't you just, I don't know, summon a demon yourself?"

"It can't be any demon," the witch said. "She needs to convince it to make a pact, and be ready to defend herself and contain it in case it refuses. That's way too risky. I have to deliver her a demon I know for a fact won't say no."

M looked at the swirling liquid inside the bottle, unsure what to say.

"Think about it," Penelope continued. "Room and board, all expenses paid. Three months, max; enough to give her the practice she needs to summon a proper demon. All those bills of yours, taken care of. And you

get to be roomies with a friendly witch! I can vouch for her, she's nice."

"But..." M said as he looked back to Penelope, trying to get the words out, unzipping his jacket to make it easier to breathe. "I'll be a demon?"

"Sort of," the witch said as she held up the potion. "This'll make you look like a demon, and trick every sort of magical effect into treating you like one—that's why the summoning can work at all. But deep inside, you'll still be human, and I'll bring that part back out with another potion once you're done. Until then, as far as everyone and everything is concerned, yeah, you'll be a demon. But you'll still be you."

M looked back at the potion. "This is a lot," he said.

"You'll still be you," Penelope repeated, putting measured emphasis on every word. "You'll just look and feel a bit different. And you'll be able to do magic."

M's gaze snapped back to the witch instantly. "Magic?"

Penelope grinned like a predator cornering her prey. "Absolutely," she said. "Demons are like magic fountains; they're living conduits. It'll just come naturally to you." She set the bottle back down. "That's part of the potion too."

M looked back down to the mixture on the counter. His heart was racing. This felt like such a big deal. It had to be risky, right? But Penelope seemed sure of what she was talking about, and besides, Leslie had vouched for her. He took off his jacket and fanned his face.

Three months. He took a deep breath. He'd probably have to tie up some loose ends and get someone to drop by and water his plants, but...

"Okay," M said before he could change his mind.

"Okay," Penelope repeated, her demeanor softening. "Then we have a deal." She took out a small document and a pen, sliding both across the counter. "Just need to make it official, then. You start in two days."

M struggled to parse the words on the page, his head a jumble of thoughts. "This, uh," he said, "this is moving really fast. You're just, like... sure I'm the right person for this? Shouldn't there be an interview?"

Penelope's cheshire grin returned. "Sweetie, you wouldn't be here if you didn't already qualify."

M made it back out onto the street. He barely remembered signing the documents, much less what they said. He took a few deep breaths, the knot in his chest easing up at last. The outside air felt so much colder; that shop was getting unbearably warm. He slipped his jacket back on, slowly making his way to the bus stop a few blocks down.

This was happening. Two days from now, at dawn, he'd be back here.

And he'd be able to do magic.

Spellbound

It was still dark when M knocked on the door to Penny Pots. There was a chill in the air, but thankfully it wasn't raining anymore. He barely had time to wonder how long he should wait until knocking again before Penelope opened the door.

"Good, you're early," she said with a smile. "C'mon in." She let M in and locked the door.

They made their way through the shop, into the area behind the counter, through the door beyond, and into a small hallway. A second, thicker door opened into what must have been a potion-making workshop, which looked as if a high school chemistry lab had been set up in the basement of a haunted house. Well, a fancy haunted house. There were whatever tools and burners you'd expect, in addition to an eccentric mix of reference books, entirely too many colorful liquids in bottles, a small cage bolted to the ground, and an actual, honest-to-goodness cauldron under an industrial air vent.

Penelope pulled up the signed contract. "Now, we were real hasty going over this last time you dropped by," she said, "and I just want to make sure we're perfectly clear on a couple of key points in here."

"Okay," M said, looking away. He never liked seeing his full name in print. Thankfully, the lab had no shortage of interesting things. Did Penelope use that cauldron? Now that he thought about it, that thing could hold so much liquid. Was she making potions by the dozens?

"Now I'm paying you a lot for this," the witch said. "Half of it is to buy your silence. Understand? I have your word." She held up the relevant page in front of him. "Article one. You cannot let anyone know about any of this." Her eyes narrowed as she flipped the contract to another page. "If this gets out it's going to break a poor girl's heart, among other things."

"Yeah, I understand," M said. Who would he even tell? It's not like he had any friends. Outside of Leslie, that is, and they must have known already. The coffee shop meeting, the weirdly specific job that wasn't on the billboard... that must have been the first part of the interview. It made a lot of sense now. It also made M nervous. Was this illegal? Or, well, breaking some sort of witch code of ethics?

"Article two," Penelope said as she put the document up in his face again, "you're going to help her get better at magic." She let it linger there a moment, then walked over to a small safe and stuffed the contract inside. "She's got to improve her basics so she can summon and bind a demon by herself."

M just looked at her, wide-eyed, feeling a little bit overwhelmed. "Uh... how do I...?"

Penelope sighed. "Just follow her lead. It'll come naturally, trust me." She closed up the safe and stood up, walking back to M. "That's what I'm paying you for; you're going to put in the work, and I'm gonna keep tabs. Don't worry about the when or how, I'll handle it. Got it?"

"Yeah, I got it," M said. The lab was a little bit too dark and Penelope's tone was a little bit too stern. Ugh, he shouldn't have thought of this place as a classroom; this whole thing was bringing back bad memories.

"Hey. Look at me," Penelope said. M looked up. She had a look of genuine concern he would've called uncharacteristic, but he didn't feel he knew her well enough to make that judgment yet. "Sorry to make a big deal about this," she continued, "but it is one to me. The witch you're going to help is my little sister, and she means the world to me."

"Oh," M said, a bit stunned. No wonder she was putting so much effort into all of this.

"I want her to succeed," Penelope continued. "I want you and me to succeed. So we're gonna make this work, and everyone's gonna walk away better off than when they started." She put her hands on his shoulders. "We're in this together, yeah?"

"Yeah," M said. "I'm gonna do my best."

"Good," the witch said, placing the potion in his hands. "Drink up."

M uncorked it with a *foomp*—he'd always liked the sound that made—and raised it to his lips. The bottle felt so heavy now. His fingers trembled. He was really doing this. The sheer weight of the unknown looming before him was suddenly impossible to ignore. What was going to happen? Would this hurt? What if something went wrong?

"What if something goes wrong?" he asked.

"Then we'll do our best to fix it," Penelope answered. "You've got an expert on your side and ideal conditions. You did your part; the rest, you have no control over. If that's enough to stop you, then that's fine. But if you're going to do it, no half measures. Give it your all, and I'll have your back."

M nodded. He took a long, deep breath, looked at the bottle, and then drank the potion.

He had wondered what purple and black tasted like; he was left wondering. Whatever was in that viscous concoction was beyond his mundane taste buds. It wasn't horrible, it didn't make him gag, it was just... indescribable. His tongue couldn't parse any of it, down to the last drop. He put the empty bottle down, awaiting some sort of effect, some sign that the potion was doing its work. Nothing yet. Penelope walked over to lean on the nearby counter, keeping a close eye on him. He looked at her; then something dawned on him.

"Oh! Uh, your sister.. What do I tell her?" M asked. Penelope gave

him a sympathetic smile.

"Oh, sweetie," she said, "that's not going to matter in a minute."

M just looked at her for a moment. Then his eyes widened, but as he opened his mouth to speak, something got caught in his throat. He let out a gasp; he wanted to clutch at his neck, but the room began to spin so fast that he reached out to grab the counter instead. His knees were getting weak; his stomach, tied up in knots.

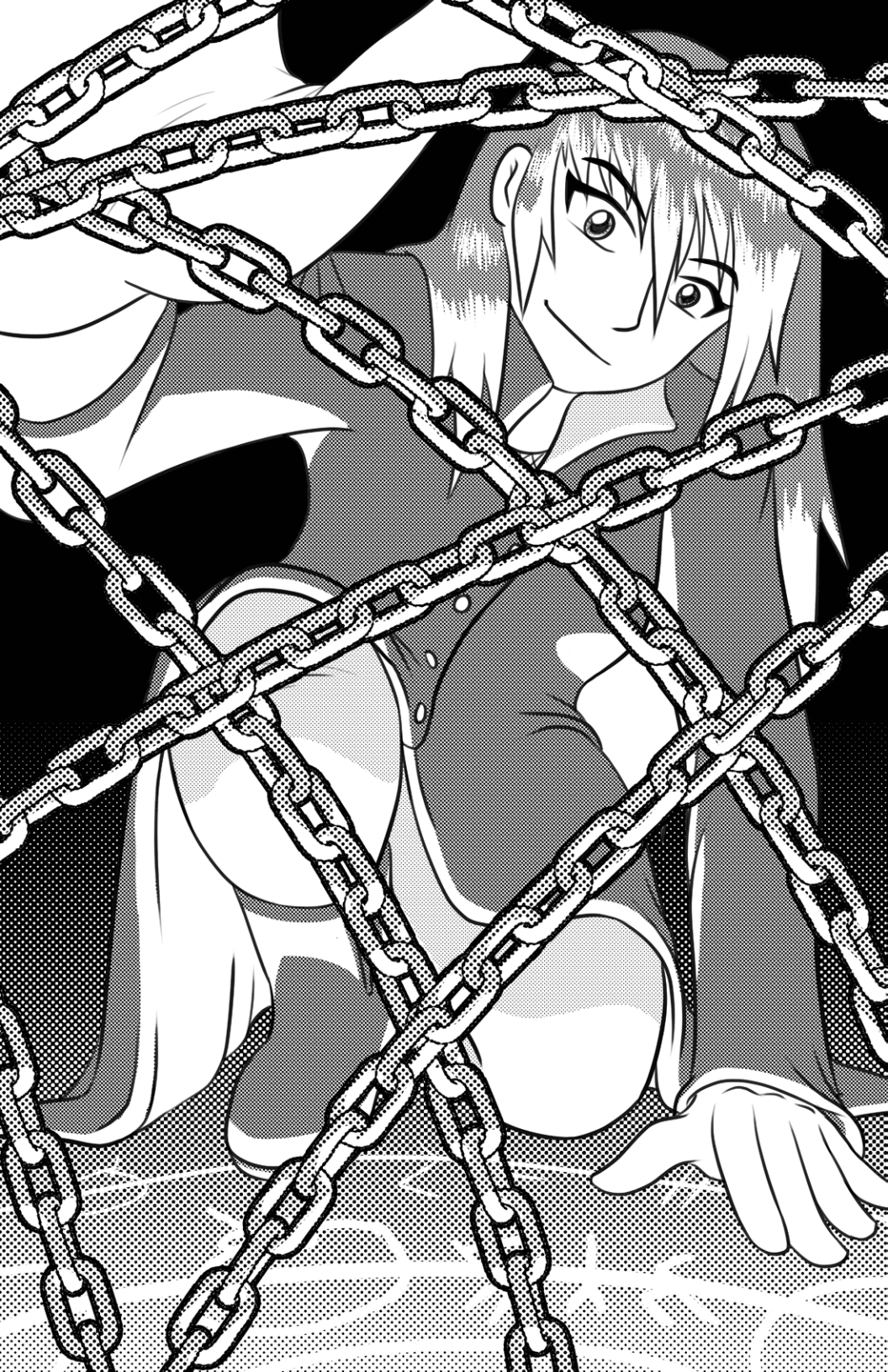
"Here we go," Penelope said as she stepped over and carefully put her arms around him. "Now, it's going to feel real weird for a bit. But that's normal, alright? This is powerful stuff." All M could do was return the hug. Everything was upside-down, sights were becoming sounds. Lightning coursed through his veins. Reality was getting away from him. Even his grip on Penelope was slipping; despite his best efforts, he couldn't hold on. His hands were being dragged away from their purchase, as if someone was pulling him away from her. He wanted to yell out, but could only manage noiseless gasps. It was like being stuck in a bad dream.

Throughout it all, she kept adjusting her grip on him as he convulsed. M felt Penelope reach down and lift him off the ground as she knelt down, her arms getting tangled up in his clothes in the process. His entire being was being bombarded with so many different conflicting signals; he couldn't parse what was happening. Only when he caught a glimpse of her looming overhead, looking down at him, did he realize how small he had become.

And then his body shouted at him in a language he didn't understand. Joints shifted, limbs stretched while others shrank, his entire head felt like a ball of clay in the hands of an eager sculptor. Twin pinpoints of fire erupted from above his brow, sending heat all the way down his spine and—incomprehensibly—even further. His skin shifted around, nerve endings going haywire. Somewhere around him, Penelope held him tight in her arms. "It's okay," she said as the potion's effect finally crested a hill. "I've got you, it's okay. Your body just needs a little time to adjust to a lot of new things."

Feeling returned to M's body, the world around him beginning to make sense again. He saw Penelope gently pick up his jacket and put it on the ground nearby, then stand up. The height was dizzying. The witch walked over to the corner of the room, gently freeing one hand so that she could make a few arcane gestures and lift the small cage from the floor, screws and all, each component lazily spinning in midair. M tried to look down from his perch; Penelope was holding him with a single hand.

The witch gently laid him down on the floor, in the center of a shimmering circle of complex geometric shapes and arcane sigils. He wanted to stand up, to get his bearings back, but his body wasn't fully



his. With another gesture, Penelope sent the cage back down and bolted it around M. He hadn't realized that's what it was there for. Now he knew; only, too late. The witch crouched down in front of him. He turned his head toward her, still in a daze.

"I know this looks bad," she said, "but I can't afford anything, or anyone, moving you from this spot until my sister completes the summoning. I'm going to meet up with her now and get that going, so just sit tight, okay?" M opened a mouth alien to him and tried to say something, anything.

Squeak.

"Okay," Penelope said with a slight smile. "Now remember: say yes to her, keep her company, help her out when you can, and soon enough she'll be ready." She took one step toward the door, but stopped. "Oh!" she said, turning back toward M. "Almost forgot the most important thing." She leaned down close to the cage, taking up almost all of M's field of view. "Don't. Get. Attached."

Penelope stood up and walked away. Step by step she made her way to the far wall, turned off the lights, closed the door behind her, and locked it. M was alone.

His body had stopped changing, but the rest of him was still trying to make heads or tails of it. His skin was covered in fur. He tentatively ran his hands—or paws, now—over his head, finding tiny horns and wide ears. Whenever he shifted his weight, however little was left of it, a long tail with a flat pointed tip slid across the floor to compensate.

The witch's potion had turned him into a mouse. Or, he thought, more like some sort of demon mouse. He was alone, in a dark room, illuminated somehow by these symbols on the ground that he could've sworn weren't glowing when he and Penelope first got there. He tried to get up, to no avail; vertigo overtook him immediately. The most he could do was stand on all fours; but there was nowhere he could go. He laid back down on the cold stone ground, defeated. Surely Penelope would reach her sister soon, and do the ritual, and summon him to her, right? That was all still happening, right? He had her word. Not much else.

He tried to let out a nervous sigh, but only managed a quiet squeak. He curled up in place, huddling against his own body to stay warm.

He thought he'd just get some horns and purple skin. Just a few months' vacation, hanging out with a witch. Learning how to use magic. Not turned into a tiny rodent with horns, caged in the corner of a dark forgotten room, awaiting the—

Before he could spiral too deeply into despair, the magic circle on the ground lit up, and filled his world with blinding light.

Making A Pact

When the light faded, M was in a different place. Another room with a stone floor and some barred windows letting in the morning sun. He was lying in the center of another circle—a set of three concentric circles, in fact—and he wasn't alone. Penelope was in the room, which was a relief. But most importantly, in front of him was a young woman with long pink hair cut short on one side. And she was overjoyed.

"Oh my gosh I did it!" she said, hopping in place, "I did it, Penny! And they're so cute!"

"Told you you could do it," Penelope answered, not moving from her comfortable leaning spot against the back wall.

M tentatively tried to move, still dizzy from the potion's effects—or could it be the summoning this time? Or maybe the circle he was in. Part of him knew it'd be very difficult to step out of it. He managed to sit up, not wanting to chance being any more upright than that.

The younger sister knelt down in front of M, careful not to touch the glowing glyphs. "Hi there!" she said. "I'm Amanda, and I'm the one who called you here. I hope you're doing okay!" She gently reached out to M with her hand, fingers together, palm up, passing it over the first of the three circles that surrounded him, stopping at the second. "Wanna team up?"

"That's not how the words go," Penelope chided.

"It doesn't matter what words you use," Amanda yelled back, "the book says they can tell my intention. So I might as well be friendly!" She turned back to M, still smiling. "Well? We can do cool things together!"

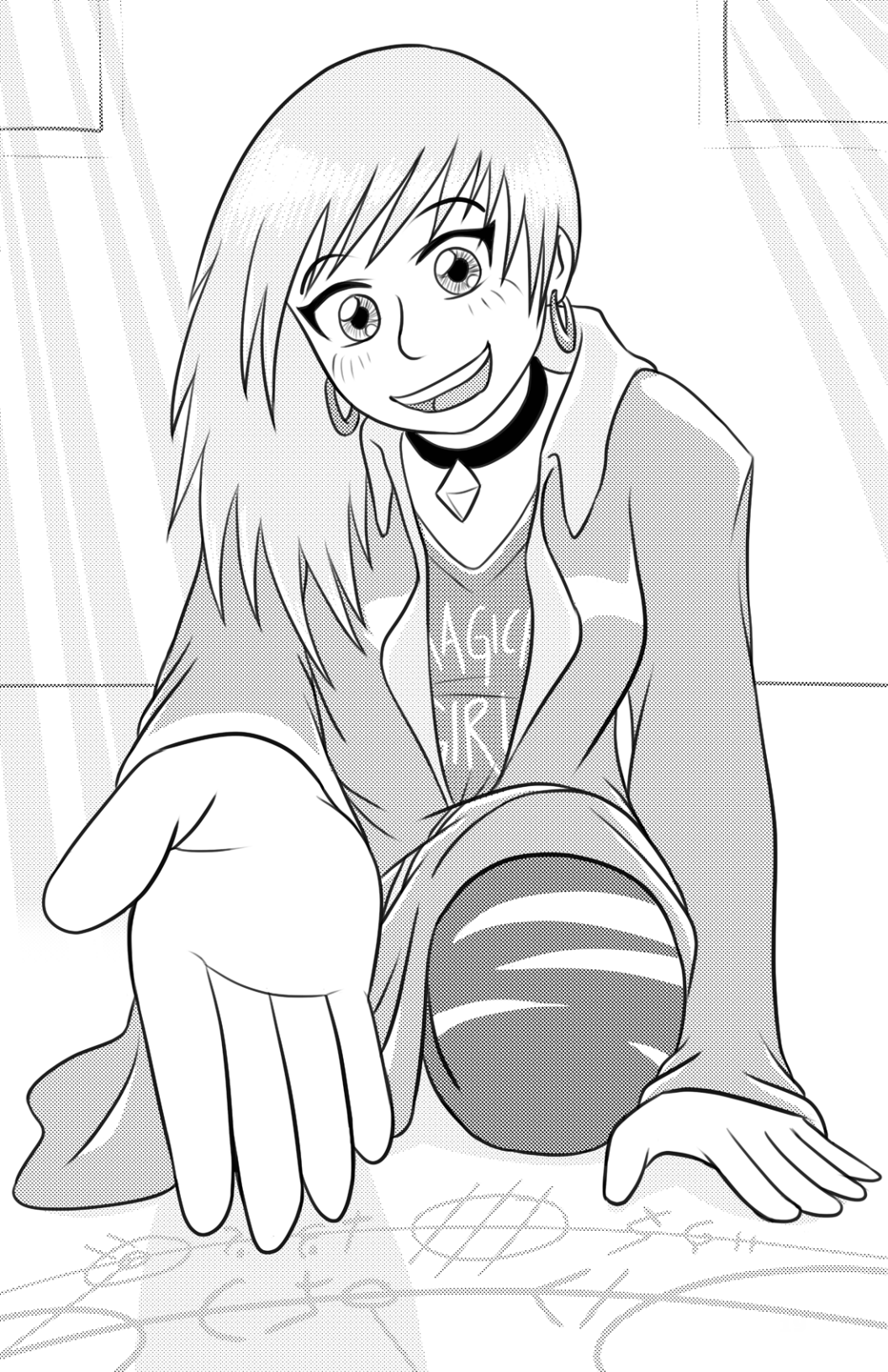
M looked at the witch's hand. Maybe he was just supposed to touch it? Penelope hadn't given him the details, but that's what made the most sense at the time. He lifted a paw and gently placed it in Amanda's palm.

His hairs immediately stood on end; a strange feeling when it happened all over the body. It had seemed like an innocuous gesture, but this was important. This was the start of something, he could feel it. He could trust her. He was in good hands.

Amanda beamed. "We're doing it! Penny, we're doing it, it's working! Uh, what's next?"

"Give it a name," Penelope said, shaking her head. "Do you need me to help?"

"No no no," Amanda said as she turned her attention back to M, "I got this. Let's see! Um, you look like a big fluffy mouse... so how about an 'M' name?" Penelope coughed in surprise; M's blood instantly ran cold, his body tensing up. Did the young witch know?



"Uh, that's a bit on the nose, don't you think?" Penelope said as she took a few steps forward. "It's got horns. How about Spike?"

"M name, M name," Amanda said, ignoring her sister. "Mouse is too common. Merry? Eh, sounds like a holiday name. Max?" She looked at M. "Oh! I'm sorry—do you have a name already? I don't want to be rude."

Squeak. That was all that M could manage. He lowered his head. This was going to be hard, wasn't it? He hadn't planned on not being able to speak. Penelope probably had, though; easier to make sure he wouldn't blab this way. His heart sank.

"Aww," Amanda said as she put her hand on top of his, giving it a little squeeze. "It's okay! We'll find you a good one! There's gotta be a good M name... Oh! I know!"

M looked up at her expectantly.

"Emily!" Amanda said with a satisfied grin. "It's an Em name, it counts!"

M kind of... froze in place for a moment.

"We know three Emilys already," Penelope said. "Don't you think something like Spi—"

"Oh wait," Amanda said, cutting off her big sister. "That's usually a girl's name, isn't it." She turned to Penelope, making sure to keep the hand connection intact. "Do demons have gender?" Her big sister looked at her for a long moment, her visible annoyance at being interrupted turning to very careful consideration of what she was going to say next.

"They grow into it," Penelope finally said.

"Oh! Okay," Amanda said, turning to look at M. "Is that kind of name okay with you?"

M couldn't move. He hadn't been ready for it to go in this direction. He glanced at Penelope, but she was making a show of looking away at the moment. He looked down. Was he okay with it? Did anything about his old self matter right now? It'd only be for a few weeks after all. He took a deep breath—as deep as his tiny lungs could manage—and looked back up at the young witch in front of him. *Squeak!*

"Okay!" Amanda said cheerfully. "Let's see, something that's not Emily... Emily...a? Emilia?" Amanda asked.

M gave a head tilt. He still hadn't fully processed the decision he'd just made.

"Emi...na? Emina?" Amanda offered.

M looked to the side. But now that he thought about it, that one didn't sound too bad? There was a part that he liked.

"Emi...lynn? Emilynn?" Amanda asked again, carefully observing M's reaction.

M sat upright, looking her in the eye. That one sounded good? That one sounded really good. Especially when Amanda said it. Okay. This

was happening. *Squeak!*

"Emilynn!" the young witch said with the biggest grin yet. "Eee, I'm so glad you like it!" She took her top hand and placed it on the ground, palm up, right in front of her companion's feet. The small mouse demon carefully took a step forward and climbed on, and the witch gently lifted her familiar out of the circle. The chalk symbols scattered into the air, leaving the floor bare. It was done; they were a pair now. "We're gonna make magic together," Amanda said happily, "and it's going to be so much fun!" She walked back to her sister, carefully carrying Emilynn in her arms.

Penelope smirked. "Congrats Mandy," she said, clapping her hands softly. She glanced at her sister's new pactmate. "That's a real good start."

"Thanks Penny!" Amanda said. "Oh my gosh, I can't believe this is really happening. I'm gonna head home right away and get to work!"

"You need a lift?" her big sister asked.

"Nah, we're good," the young witch said, "thanks, though! It's a short bus ride anyway, and besides, we need to get to know each other better!"

"Yeah," Penelope said. "Know your partner, know yourself. Good luck out there."

"I don't need luck," Amanda replied playfully. "I have a familiar now, and she's the best!"

Going Home

"Oh hey, you did it!" said the tattooed man at the front desk as Amanda walked out of the hallway leading back to the summoning rooms. "Congrats Mandy!"

"Thanks Bern!" the witch replied, gently putting Emilynn down in front of him so she could retrieve her jacket from the guest closet and put it on. "Third time's the charm!"

"Only third?" Bern said skeptically, smiling at the small demon. He put his hand out as a greeting. "Hey there little guy, welcome to the Summoning Circle." He leaned in closer, speaking in a mock whisper. "It's kind of a misnomer; the building's technically a rectangle."

"Her name is Emilynn," Amanda corrected as she retrieved her hat.

"Oh! Sorry about that," Bern replied. "Hey there little Emilynn. There's a big whole world outside these doors, I hope you like it."

Emilynn leaned in and tentatively sniffed the man's hand, getting acquainted with his smell. Is that how greetings worked when you were a demon mouse? Or, well, any sort of demon? Come to think of it, were demon mice even a thing? Maybe there were more out there somewhere. That was a strange thing to contemplate; everyone expecting you to behave like an archetype you knew nothing about.

"Okay, ready!" Amanda said cheerfully as she walked back to the desk, putting her hands down on the edge, palms up. "Thank you for waiting." Emilynn turned around to face her, then carefully stepped up onto her hands. The witch brought her familiar up to her chest, making a little platform with her arms. "Hey, you're small enough to perch on my shoulder. Do you want to try that?"

Emilynn looked up. Everything looked so much bigger and taller and further now. But, well, maybe it was worth a shot. The familiar tentatively sat up, then carefully put a paw in front of the other and climbed. A whole two steps later, vertigo returned and the demon mouse fell back into the crook of Amanda's arm, dizzy beyond belief.

"Oh no!" Amanda said, carefully repositioning her pactmate. "Aww, feeling woozy? We'll try it another time, it's okay."

"Yeah, summoning takes a lot out of 'em," Bern said, scratching between his cornrows. "Should probably be fine by tomorrow, if she's like most demons that make their way through here."

"Oh, okay," Amanda said. "Well, that makes me feel a bit better. Having your familiar perch on your shoulder is part of the dream, you know!"

"Oh I know, I know!" Bern replied. "You gonna be okay getting

home? I'd offer you a ride, but I'm mentoring a new witch in a minute and there's gonna be a group summoning after lunch. You know I'm gonna have to be there to put out the fires."

"It's okay, I got it!" Amanda said as she headed for the door. "Good luck with the group, you got this!"

"Thanks!" Bern replied, "it's what I do!"

Emilynn looked wide-eyed at the outside world. It had barely been a few hours, but it felt like a totally different place now. Everything was brighter and louder and... there was more of it. Little shimmering forms fluttering along power lines. Glowing graffiti in the road that no one seemed to mind. A tall, thin, heatless green flame billowing out of a crack in the pavement, that Amanda just walked by without flinching.

Huh.

Emilynn held on as the young witch did some repositioning so she could dig into her pockets with a free hand. "I should really bring my purse next time," she said, "I can make some room in there for you! Okay, got it." She pulled out her transit card and walked up to the stop. Every step brought new odors, new smells that before would've barely registered but which were now almost overwhelming. And though they had just met minutes ago, Amanda's scent was already familiar and, in a way, comforting.

A bus came by soon enough. The people on it were, for the most part, not witches. Thankfully, they also weren't, for the most part, staring at Emilynn. The fact that Amanda wore a pointed hat must have tipped most of them off about the witch part, so the presence of a little fluffy demon in her hands wasn't raising any alarms. She had found a seat near the back, which gave her familiar a nice view out the window.

"Look Emilynn," Amanda said as the bus headed along its route, "this is the neighborhood where my sister works! Mine isn't too far away, we're sort of at two edges of the witches quarter. They call it that because that's where most of us are set up. It's really cool during festivals, I'll show you around!"

Squeak. Emilynn liked the sound of that. Maybe there'd be one in the next three months they could both attend? That sounded like a good time. Somehow the idea of missing that opportunity brought up a lot of anxiety. But it was easily dismissed, at least for now; there was plenty to look at outside.

This was not entirely a new part of town. Penny Pots was here, after all. But even the parts that were familiar to the familiar looked different now. Emilynn could have sworn that glimmering archway wasn't at that intersection before. And where had the neon plants on every balcony been this morning? Surely they would've stood out in the dark of the early hours. These were the streets around Penelope's store; Emilynn was sure of it. But now they were alive in ways that were hard

to understand, and not just because witches were actually up and about at this time of day. What was going on? At least the young witch wasn't making a big deal of it. That was reassuring.

The pair eventually arrived at their stop. There was a bounce in the young witch's step as she walked down the paving stones of a sleepy side street; the old storefronts gave it such character. There were fewer magical flourishes, but they were still present here and there: a cat leaving a trail of stardust as it jumped from rooftop to rooftop; a mural on the wall of a house slowly shifting from day to night and back again. They were still in the witches quarter, despite being far from its heart. "We're almost there, Emilynn!" Amanda said. "I can't wait to show you my house! Well, I guess it's gonna be your house too, hee!" She crossed over to the other side of the street. "I wonder if demons can own houses," she mused along the way. "I mean there's big human-sized demons, they have stuff like clothes and such, that's probably a thing. I need to read up on that, there's so much I don't know!"

Amanda came to a stop in front of an empty store. The lights were off, though it was hard to see anything beyond the window display area due to large mismatched curtains blocking off the view from inside. The witch walked up to the door and unlocked it. "We're here, Emilynn," she said with happy trepidation, "this is our home!" She made her way inside, carefully closing the door and locking it behind the two of them.

"This is the ground floor," Amanda said as she briskly made her way to the stairs close by. "There's not much to it yet, but soon enough it's going to be a store! Until then, it's mostly for storage and the workshop in the back. The fun living part is upstairs. It's a bit cramped, but it's ours!" She quickly hopped up the steps, turning on the lights as soon as she made it to the top.

The second floor was set up like a studio: bed, kitchenette, computer desk wedged between overflowing bookcases, folded-up easel propped up against blank canvases, television carefully balanced on top of milk crates full of odds and ends... it was a bit of a mess.

"It's a bit of a mess," Amanda confirmed, "but it's my mess. Hee! I guess it's your mess too now, Emilynn." She grinned, lifting the little demon mouse up to eye level. "I've been saying your name a lot, haven't I. I hope that's okay. I really like it." She smiled sweetly.

Squeak! Emilynn really liked it too.

"Heehee, I'm glad!" Amanda said, gently cradling the familiar in her arms. She kicked off her shoes, took a few steps, and gently put the demon mouse down on the bed before taking off her hat and jacket. "Make yourself comfortable, I'll get lunch ready! Gosh, I can't believe it's not even noon yet. It feels like such a long day already. Um, demons eat food, right? Oh right of course you do; Esmeralda eats food. She's real picky, too. Are you picky, Emilynn?"

Squeak?

"Okay good, haha!" Amanda said as she busied herself in the kitchen.

Emilynn carefully padded around on the bed, testing it out. The dizziness was finally starting to clear up, thank goodness. And... it was really nice to hear Amanda say...

It was really nice to hear Amanda say...

Okay.

There were no distractions right now. This was it; a good time to try those words on. This was important, and delaying it would just lead to more anxiety and frankly there was already way too much of that in life already. Emilynn could do this.

It was really nice to hear Amanda say her name.

There. She was Emilynn and that was her name and she really liked it and this is where she lived now because she was the familiar of a very nice witch who smelled really nice and was kind to her and every time she said her name it made her heart beat a little faster because it started with something very meaningful to her and then turned into a wonderful word that they could share together.

There!

Emilynn flopped down on the bed, heart racing. Why had this been so hard? There was nothing holding her back, after all; she was a demon now—ostensibly—and save for one or two people, no one had any reason to associate her with the person who'd walked into Penelope's shop two days ago. She was Amanda's familiar and she would help her get better at magic and that's all there was to it. She was free. Free to finally...

She hesitated. Not now. Not yet. She'd taken such a big step already, she deserved a break. She could finish that thought later. Besides, this was nice. Amanda was over in the kitchen, humming along as she cooked. It was hard to see what because of the television and the counter in the way, but what Emilynn could smell was delightful. As one moment turned into the next, the place looked a little less like a mess and a little more like a home.

This morning had been a fresh start; none of the worries prior to that terrifying moment had made it through. It wouldn't last forever, of course. But every day was enough. The small familiar closed her eyes, focusing on the sound of her witch's voice, the softness of the covers.

"Food's ready!" Amanda said after a while. She walked over with a plate, a skip in her step. Emilynn sat up, curious. She was hit with the sudden realization that she had no idea how to eat. Maybe it'd come to her? She'd managed to pick up how to walk, sort of. Maybe the potion's effects included some instincts. The young witch sat down cross-legged on the bed, unfolding a placemat from the crook of her arm and putting the plate down on it. "I only brought one fork," she said to Emilynn. "I don't have any tiny ones. I hope that's okay!"

Squeak!

The mouse demon was pretty confident she could figure something out. She was getting a little hungry, after all, and the stir-fried-rice-looking thing Amanda had prepared looked pretty good. Why worry about it? They were a team. They'd work it out.

Big Plans

As soon as the empty plate touched the bottom of the sink, Amanda picked up her familiar and headed to the stairs with a spring in her step. "C'mon," she said, "I want to show you something." Emilyynn held on, making sure not to dig her little fingers too deeply into Amanda's shirt.

With the lights on, the store proper didn't look so bad. There were boxes lying around, paintings waiting to be hung up, and the whole place was in need of a healthy cleaning session or two, but there was a lot of character here and it shone through. The witch took her familiar to the back room.

"Here it is, Emilyynn" Amanda said as she entered the workshop. The entire room was built around a giant central slab of stone, set on a large wooden block to bring it up to waist height. Everything else was piled up around it, along the walls; mixed sets of tools clearly meant for entirely different things, piles of books, three separate work desks, and a... napping couch?

The witch walked over to the slab, gently running her fingers along the edge. "This is where I'm going to craft magic items," she said. "I've wanted to make and enchant things since I was a little girl. And, well, ever since getting my degree, I've been trying. But it's not really a one-person operation, or something that just humans can do."

Amanda gently pet Emilyynn on the head. "That's why I'm so happy that you're here!" she said. "Well... at least, that's why I was so happy this morning. Now that we've spent some time together I'm even happier, haha."

Squeak!

"Aww, yeah, exactly!" Amanda replied as she bent down to be level with the slab. "Here, I can put things together, and set up the circles I need, and... together, we can make things! I've never managed to make an enchantment stick to anything before, but once I do, I'm gonna be able to open this shop. I'm going to bring magic to so many more people, Emilyynn. I'm so excited."

The familiar looked at the witch, her heart beating faster again. She hadn't been able to put her finger on it before, but now she realized what drew her to Amanda so much. She saw her motivation, her inspiration; she saw how driven she was to make this project happen. She didn't have much experience, sure, but she more than made up for it with determination.

Amanda's dream was to create wonderful things. And at that moment, Emilyynn wanted nothing else than to help her make it come

true.

They both went back upstairs, Amanda lost in thought. The witch gently deposited her familiar on the bed before pulling some books off the shelves. Left to her own devices for the first time, Emilynn decided to explore the apartment while the witch dove into her books, scribbling furiously in an open notebook.

Studio or not, to the small familiar, the place was gigantic. There was so much to see, so much to smell! So many nooks and crannies to slip into. She was getting the hang of this getting-around thing.

Emilynn could hear Amanda giggle as the demon mouse tentatively hopped up onto bookshelves, carefully discovering the apartment's high places. She had to admit, even once you got past the initial thrill of jumping several times your own height, getting to see things from a different point of view was pretty fun. Sometimes you even found forgotten treasure. She quickly padded over to the other end of the bookshelf she was on, drawn to the vibrant bit of folded color.

Squeak!

Amanda looked up at her familiar, perched atop a bookshelf; she was holding a piece of bright pink fabric. "Did you find something?" she asked, standing up to get a closer look. Emilynn carefully held it over the edge; the young witch took it, wiping off some of the dust that had accumulated. "Oh my gosh," she said as she unfurled the ribbon in her hands, "I'd completely forgotten where I put that!" She looked up with a big smile. "Thank you!"

Emilynn bounced happily. She wasn't really sure how expressive her face was now, but she tried to get her feelings across as best she—wait. Wait. How could she have gone the whole day without doing this? She sat up, looking around. There had to be one in this place. But where? Ah!

She scurried back along the path she'd taken to get up on the bookshelf, carefully jumping down from sturdy thing to sturdy thing until she'd reached the ground, then made her way to the bathroom. She carefully set herself up, and jumped on top of the counter.

Her reflection looked back at her.

There she was. A big fluffy mouse. Gosh, she had expressive eyes. For a rodent, at least. And her horns looked way smaller than they felt, somehow? She hadn't tried poking anything with them; hopefully that's not what they were there for. And goodness gracious, her ears were enormous! There was a longer tuft of fur between them, covering the top of her head; she idly played with it. That was unusual. Maybe she could style that into something, like hair. It had a faint blue hue, like the rest of her fur, that stood out more in this light.

She put her paw up against the mirror. Was it weird to find yourself cute?

One of her ears twitched. There was a fuzziness in the air, but it went away quickly. She wasn't sure what to make of it. She had more pressing matters: she suddenly remembered she had a tail. It ended in one of those arrow-like pointy things; did demons really have tails like that? She'd always thought that was just in cartoons or something. She tentatively poked at it, causing it to twitch. Would it move on its own? She hadn't really paid attention to it up until now. What did it mean when mice shook their tails again? Wait, she was a thinking, sentient being; that wouldn't apply to her anyway, would it? Could she... could she just move it like a limb?

She raised her tail. Huh. She brought the end a bit closer to her raised hand, and touched a finger with the tip. She could totally move it. That was neat!

"There you are!" Amanda said as she walked in. "Hee, are you checking yourself out?" She crouched down to be closer to Emilyynn's level, looking in the mirror; her familiar turned back around to follow her gaze. "That's you!" she said cheerfully.

They both stayed there for a moment, smiling. Well, the witch was smiling; it was hard to tell with her familiar. But both of them knew, and that was enough.

"Hey Emilyynn," Amanda said, standing back up, "I have a surprise for you. Can you close your eyes for a moment?"

Squeak. The mouse demon did so. She could feel Amanda slipping something around her midsection, but wasn't sure what. Had she gotten her something to wear? She felt the witch fiddle around with it a little longer than felt necessary, and she definitely started over at least once, but soon enough she was done.

"Okay," the witch said, "open your eyes!"

Emilyynn looked. Amanda had put the bright pink ribbon around her, tying it behind her in a big bow. It was perfectly clean now; not a speck of dust on it. It was also adorable. She put her paws up to her mouth and let out a muffled *squeak*.

"Eeee I'm so glad you like it!" Amanda said, bouncing in place. "I'm sorry if I'm being too much, I'm just..." She bent down again, putting her face next to the counter to be closer to her familiar. "I'm so glad you're here."

Emilyynn turned around to face her and before she could realize what she was doing she'd taken a step forward and was affectionately rubbing her face against the witch's cheek. Her little heart was beating so fast. This was all so much, and she wanted to return the kindness she'd been given any way she could.

"Awww!" Amanda said, reaching up to gently stroke the little demon mouse's head. "Hey Emilyynn," the witch said after a while, "wanna take a picture?"

The familiar gently stepped back, set herself up, and jumped on Amanda's shoulder.

"Oh my gosh you did it!" the witch said, carefully standing up as Emilyynn adjusted her perch. "Okay okay let's do this before I get too excited." She took out her phone, figuring out the best angle for a selfie. "Is this okay?" she asked, tilting her head toward the mouse.

Squeak! Emilyynn did her best to find a good pose as Amanda took a few pictures.

"Oh, my friends are going to be so jealous!" the witch said as she posted the pics.

Emilyynn had completely forgotten about social media. Her phone was back home, under lock and key, and no real way to access it for months, at any rate. Not that there was much to go back to. She'd set up some scheduled posts about a bogus vacation, setting the whole thing up specifically so she wouldn't have to worry about it. She was free. At least, for now.

Understanding the Process

M was having a bad night. The covers were too hot, and clingy, and wouldn't come off. There was something else in the bed, too, brushing up against an arm or a leg but always slinking back out of reach afterwards. And the phone kept beeping, ringing, filling up with bill notifications and friends asking why there hadn't been any posts in weeks and there was no way to turn it off because it was out of reach and miles away and locked inside a desk at the back of a deserted room overgrown with dying dried-out plants and—

Squeak!!

Emilynn shook herself awake, her heart practically beating out of her chest. It took her a long moment to recognize what was real and what wasn't. It was dark. It was night. She was on a pillow on the floor. She had to repeat the words multiple times in her head. She was Emilynn, Amanda's familiar, and she was a small demon mouse (at least for now), and that was okay. Leslie was taking care of her plants, Penelope was handling the bills. Everything was fine.

Except that she was on a pillow on the floor. She really didn't want to be there right now.

Emilynn sat up. Amanda had set up this little bed for her before going to sleep, and she'd been very grateful for that, but now... it just felt so far away, even though it was literally next to where the young witch was sleeping. She didn't want to disturb her, but she also desperately didn't want to be alone for one more minute. As carefully and gently as she could, she leaped up onto the large bed above her.

The witch was sprawled out on her bed. And she was breathing, which was a big relief to the little familiar. Emilynn carefully made her way across; part of her was worried she'd wake Amanda up and make her mad, but her desire for closeness overrode whatever anxiety she was feeling. The mouse demon stopped just shy of the young witch's side, then curled up in the nook of her armpit.

"Nnnnf..." Amanda groaned, rolling to her side and pulling the covers with her.

Emilynn froze and closed her eyes, squished into the mattress by the sudden movement. She very carefully wriggled free, stopping as soon as she heard Amanda squirm again. When the mouse opened her eyes again, she realized she was pressed against the young witch's chest, inches away from her face, held under one of her arms, immersed in her familiar smell.

She fell asleep almost instantly.

The sun was already up by the time she awoke. Her ears flicked involuntarily as she peeked her eyes open, lost in the morning haze.

"Hey snugglebug," Amanda said softly, smiling at the little familiar.

Emilynn shook a tiny bit in place, startled. The young witch had clearly woken up before she did. She seemed happy, though, and that washed away all her worries before they could pop up again.

"You hopped up during the night to cuddle!" Amanda said, giving the demon mouse a tiny boop on the nose. "That's so adorable. Did you get lonely?"

Squeak. Emilynn didn't want to worry her, but... she didn't want to lie to her. Not now, not ever.

"Aww, I'm sorry," Amanda said as she carefully sat up on the bed. "Well then, I guess we're gonna have to rework our sleeping arrangements." She stretched, then hopped to her feet. "Alright Emilynn, I'm making breakfast, and then we're gonna get to work!"

The morning preparations were a blur. The young witch used a surprising number of spells to clean her clothes, prepare breakfast, and perform a dozen tiny tasks that were part of her morning routine. Emilynn's ears buzzed every single time there was magic in the air; it was still a strange sensation, but now that she knew what it was, she could adapt to it.

The workshop looked a little different once they made their way downstairs; the morning light gave it a bit of energy it didn't have the day before as it reflected off the central block of smooth stone that served as a table. Amanda walked to one of the shelves, picking up a half-full fabric bag. "Now where did I put those," she mused, overturning some of the messes that had overtaken the various desks lining the walls.

Emilynn hopped up onto the stone slab, sniffing its surface reflexively. She couldn't quite put her finger on why, but it felt... pristine, in a way. Like a blackboard, ready to be drawn upon with an instrument the familiar wanted to reach for, but didn't know how to.

"Found 'em!" Amanda exclaimed, walking up to the stone table with a pair of tinted goggles in hand. She slipped the goggles on and carefully opened the bag, making the mouse's ears buzz again. "Now Emilynn, this room is an enchantment workshop. I know demons can pretty much use magic on instinct, but us humans, we can't just turn magic into spells. We have to learn how it works, and then kinda push it into doing what we want. And what I want to do is push it *into* things! That's enchantment."

The witch lowered the bag to the slab. "Enchantment needs magic to work," she continued, "and to make magic work, you need to be able to sense it." Amanda carefully emptied the bag out, causing its contents—large metal nuts without their screws—to spill over the stone.

One of them was glowing softly. "Now these may all look alike, but one of them is actually—"

Emilynn padded over to the glowing one, experimentally poking it with a paw.

"Uh," Amanda said, looking at the mouse slack-jawed. "Actually, uh... magical. Yeah, that one." She bent down to get a closer look at her familiar. "You can just see that?"

Emilynn nodded. Come to think of it, why had she just touched it like that? It was clearly kept in some sort of insulated bag. Couldn't it have been dangerous? Somehow, the possibility of that had never entered her mind. She knew that it was harmless, but she didn't know why she knew that.

"...Huh." Amanda scratched her head. "That's... that's really useful! I guess that's why familiars are so important for this, haha. Magic sensing is so tricky for me that Penelope got me these goggles so I wouldn't have to wear myself out. I guess we'll just skip ahead then!" She walked over to another desk, rifling through papers and baubles until she found a small ornate wooden stick. "Okay, so," she said as she returned to the slab, "magic is easier to spot when it's concentrated, but there's always enough floating around to cast a spell with. Lemme show you how witches do it!"

Amanda lifted the wand into the air, closed her eyes, and focused. The tip of the wand began to faintly glow. "See?" she said as she looked at Emilynn, "it's glowing because I'm using it kinda like an antenna, sort of. Just this part is so hard to learn! It took me, like, at least a year in school. A lot of folks drop out before getting there. But I didn't!"

Emilynn looked down. She remembered that day. The moment when the frustration at being unable to get any results finally won out over the desire to learn magic. There was only so much anyone could do without getting a sign that progress was being made. Maybe if she'd stuck it out one more day, things would be different now. But then... she probably wouldn't be here right with Amanda right now. And that possibility tugged at her heart something fierce.

The witch gently traced a circle in the air with the glowing tip of her wand, adding in some symbols here and there like an artist painting on a canvas. "So I feel where the magic is, and I focus it into a single point—my wand here—and I guide it into a specific pattern, and then..." She thrust the wand through the center of the circle.

The circle's glowing lines immediately scattered away, evaporating into colorless fog as the wand shot out a small sparkling projectile. It lazily sailed halfway across the workshop, slowing to a stop with a fizz before bursting into a miniature fireworks display. A second later, there was no sign left of any of that having happened.

"Aaaand that's magic!" Amanda said with a wide grin. Emilynn was



still looking at where the spell had happened, awestruck, ears flicking. "Isn't it cool?" the witch said, putting her wand down. "Now usually there's a lot of prep work, but over time we learn to squish some steps together or make them simpler. Or use tools to skip them, like my goggles."

Amanda gathered up the metal nuts and returned them to the bag. "And, like, sometimes you practice a spell so much you don't even need to see or feel what you're doing anymore, it's like muscle memory. Practice some more and you can get the right focus just through your fingertips, so you don't need a wand, either. Penelope made me do so many chores back when we lived together that I pretty much know all those spells by heart now, haha!"

Emilynn padded over, picking up the last bit of metal and placing it in the bag.

"Why thank you," the witch said, drawing the string and putting the whole thing back on the shelf behind her. "So that's magic. And enchanting, well... that means stacking a bunch of spells on top of each other like a tower of cards without making it fall. Do you think you can help with that?"

...*Squeak*? Emilynn had barely been able to keep up. But if she could see the process in action, maybe it'd come to her naturally like everything else had?

"Aw, don't sell yourself short," Amanda said with a smile. "I'm sure we can make it work."

Checking In

Amanda sighed, lying down on the workshop couch. Making it work was a lot harder than expected, it turned out. "I can't. I just can't."

Emilynn paced back and forth along the edge of the stone slab, making little worried noises. It was almost noon and Amanda hadn't gotten the courage to try a single enchantment yet. Worse, she seemed entirely ready to call it a day.

They had been attempting to perform the same enchantment for the entire weekend; over and over at first, but with progressively longer and more frequent breaks as the days went on. Now Monday was half over and they had nothing to show for it, just varying degrees of catastrophic failure.

Setting up the enchantment field was the easy part. Emilynn immediately saw how the shimmering sphere developed, how it gently pulsed and shifted around the item to be enchanted (in this instance, another metal nut). She also saw how every spell cast into it made it more unstable; sometimes parts of it lashed out like little solar flares, or the entire field would squash down at the poles.

Maintaining the field was the hard part. Enchantment required so many spells—a primer, the storage envelope, the spell to be stored in the item, the activation logic, and so on—that instability was a certainty. Amanda would cast the spells; Emilynn's job was to maintain the field. It was a two-person operation. But since half the team was a mouse, it made the entire process very challenging.

Emilynn had quickly picked up on how to stabilize the field; touching it made her ears ring and her horns vibrate, but the tactile approach worked. She could smooth out the imperfections in the magic bubble's surface, squash down flare-ups, and massage it back into shape. But even her best wasn't good enough when she needed to be in multiple places at once. Her little paws only let her move so fast.

Sometimes Amanda would get the spell order or timing wrong. Sometimes Emilynn would trip up while trying to keep the enchantment stable. Inevitably, the field would dissipate, and both of them would have to start over again.

"C'mere," Amanda said, reaching out to the table with a hand. Emilynn carefully climbed on, and the witch brought her up to her chest and let her curl up under her chin. Amanda idly scritch'd the demon mouse on the head, between her horns, where she liked it most. The familiar began to relax, letting out little satisfied sounds, and her witch relaxed in turn.

They laid there a while before Amanda spoke again. "Why does it have to be so hard?" she asked. "We have all the materials, we know the process by heart... why can't we make an enchantment work? And it's such a simple one, too! Is a metal nut a bad focal ingredient? Is the workshop layout wrong? It's not fair, Emilyynn."

Amanda's phone beeped. She let out a groan, searching around the nearby shelf with her free hand until she got ahold of it, then brought it in front of her face. "Penelope wants to know how we're doing," she mumbled. The witch let out a long sigh. "Maybe going outside will help. Hey Emilyynn, wanna see where my sister works?"

The demon mouse paused for a moment. Amanda didn't know that's where she'd come from. She'd have to pretend to see it for the first time. That seemed easy enough. *Squeak!*

"Okay," Amanda said with exhausted resignation, "just give me a minute or five, and we'll head on over there."

One lethargic bus ride later, they were at Penny Pots. Leaving the apartment had indeed helped, if only a bit. Amanda seemed to have regained some of her usual enthusiasm. Getting away from the workshop seemed to be a good thing for her right now.

The store looked different still—this was a sunny day at reasonable hours, finally—but it was undeniably the same. Bigger, though. The biggest difference was in what Emilyynn could see this time around: magical graffiti covered nearly every available surface, no doubt identifying product names and prices, and perhaps even more. There was definitely a layer that she just hadn't known existed before yesterday morning happened, and she wanted to know more about it.

"Penny, we're here!" Amanda said as she walked in, Emilyynn perched on her shoulder. "She's probably in the back somewhere, I'll go get her." The witch walked around a bookshelf and carefully picked her familiar up, placing her down somewhere comfortable. "Hey Esmeralda, I brought you a friend. Be nice now, okay?"

Emilyynn instantly realized where she was: the cushioned box with the trellised sides. This was the cat's spot. And that meant...

She turned around, coming nose to nose with the sleeping Esmeralda. At this proximity, and this size, she looked so big. Emilyynn wanted to yelp or shout but stifled every urge; she did not want to wake the cat. That was a bad idea. Who knows how she'd react to a mouse, even one that was a bit larger and fluffier (and pointier) than the garden variety ones?

"Stay here, I'll be right back," Amanda said as she walked off, leaving her familiar to fend for herself next to the snoozing kitty.

Emilyynn very carefully turned around and took one gentle step after the other. She just needed to get to the edge without making a sound, and then she could jump to—

Thump.

She couldn't move. There was a paw firmly planted on her tail. Her heart began to race. What could she do? Should she fight back? *Could* she fight back? How would a demon mouse fare against a housecat?

"You can stay," a whispering voice spoke out. The mouse turned around, shaking from nerves. The cat... Esmeralda had talked. As she opened her eyes—all three of them, this time—and her fur rippled with a life of its own in multicolored hues, Emilyynn immediately realized what should have been evident from the start: this was Penelope's familiar. "Besides," Esmeralda continued with a smile, "you take up so little space now."

The mouse withered under the cat's gaze, her blood running cold. She knew. Either Penelope had told her, or she'd figured it out by herself, but she knew. Esmeralda lifted her paw from the small familiar's tail and gently placed it on Emilyynn's head.

"You turned out awfully cute, considering," the cat added, evidently relishing in this entire turn of events. "Enjoying yourself so far?"

Emilyynn didn't know what to do. The other familiar was much bigger and stronger than her, and no doubt had had years of practice on her when it came to magic. Plus, she was in close contact with Penelope, who more or less had Emilyynn's fate in her hands at the moment. She felt powerless against her.

"Cat got your tongue?" Esmeralda asked, grinning with bared fangs.

...*Squeak.* That was all that the trembling mouse could manage. The other familiar blinked in surprise.

"Oh, hon," the cat said, her playfulness evaporating. "It's alright. We don't need to talk right now." She freed Emilyynn from her grasp and closed her eyes, rolling onto her side. "Come on," she said, much gentler this time.

The mouse hesitated, unsure what to do. Was Esmeralda offering to...

"It's warmer here," the cat added.

Emilyynn took a few hesitant steps toward the other familiar, unsure which instincts, if any, she was following at the moment. Once she was close enough, Esmeralda reached out with a paw and pulled her in, curling up around her.

"I apologize if that was a bit much," Esmeralda said. "There's so much work to be done here, it's rare that I get to play." Try as she might, Emilyynn couldn't move, let alone escape the cat's grasp. Every strand of hair was clinging to her like affectionate velcro. That said, she was surprised at just how immediately comfortable she was; Esmeralda's soft side was like a big fluffy cloud. She did her best to calm down, relieved that on some level she and the larger familiar were getting along. "You seem exhausted. This is a big job, you know," the cat added.



"There are lots of tiny opportunities to take a break during the day and it pays to become good at spotting them. So... consider this a lesson."

By the time Amanda returned, Emilynn had fallen asleep more than once, losing track of time between naps.

"You're doing that thing again where you get excited about something and it takes over your life," Penelope said as she followed Amanda into the room. "You're gonna wear yourself out. Your familiar, too."

"It's fine! We're fine!" the young witch said, looking back to her sister. "Besides, we get lots of time to rest between... attempts. I got to show Emilynn my paintings! And she's getting really good at dominos?" Amanda navigated around the maze of shelves, making her way to the spot she'd left her familiar. "She learned how to help out with enchanting in no time at all, but she just can't get around the field as fast as she—" Amanda gasped, stopping mid-sentence. Esmeralda's ear twitched. "Oh my gosh," she said in a whisper, "look! They're cuddling, it's so cute!"

Emilynn was too comfortable to move. Her familiar friend didn't seem in any hurry to get up either, so the mouse decided to follow her lead. The two witches walked back to the counter to finish their conversation, leaving their familiars alone for the moment.

"You remind me of the dire mice I used to hunt when I was younger," Esmeralda said, causing the smaller familiar to tense up. "Oh don't worry, you're much more fun to play with. And you do look a bit like them, so I'm wondering if you can do the same tricks."

...*Squeak*? Emilynn was suddenly very curious. There were others like her? Well, maybe more like cousins, judging by how Esmeralda was describing the connection. Still!

"There's something they do that I always found very clever," the cat said. "They're very good burrowers, you see. Whenever I'd get close to one, they'd pick a spot—sometimes in the air, in front of their nose—and line it up with another one far away, then dig into it with everything they had. And then... poof, they'd come out the other side. Now, you're bigger than they were, but just in case you need to get around a little quicker... might be worth a try, hm?"

Emilynn's mind raced. Could she do that? After the week they'd just had, she desperately wanted to help Amanda make progress with her work. But how did this work? Could she really just pick a spot, and... poof?

"Here's a thing about us demons," Esmeralda said. "We have access to all the magic we want, but we're not very creative. Sometimes all we need to be able to do something is to know that we can."

"Emilynn!" Amanda shouted from behind the counter. "Penelope wants to see you!"

The small familiar's ears perked. She had to go. But she couldn't.

"Penelope's going to get mad if you make her wait," Esmeralda said.

"Too bad I'm not going to let you go." Emilynn wriggled, unable to break free. "If you want to escape," the cat whispered into the mouse's ear, "you're going to have to be clever."

"Emilynn!" Amanda shouted again, a little louder this time.

The demon mouse squirmed. She didn't want to make either of the sisters angry and there was no way she could get out of the grasp of Esmeralda or her unusually clingy fur. Was the cat really making her do this? Could she possibly pull off a trick she'd just learned a minute ago? But if what the larger familiar had said was true, maybe all demons like her could do it. How did it go? Pick a spot, line it up with another, far away, and...

"EMILYNN!"

Poof.

Emilynn dropped onto the counter, leaving a small puff of dark blue smoke in the air where she'd just appeared. She scurried forward in a panic, stopping just shy of the edge. She could do it. She *had* done it, in fact. She looked back at Esmeralda. The cat was still curled up in her spot, a smug smile on her face.

"Oh, there you are," Amanda said as she turned around, spotting her familiar on the counter. She walked over and picked her up. "Penelope wants to check up on you." She walked over to the back door, which sent Emilynn's heart rate up—but then thankfully walked right past the lab, and instead took the next door into what seemed to be the older sister's office.

"There's the little mouse," Penelope said, sitting down at her desk. "Glad to hear this whole thing is working out for now, despite the shortcomings."

"She's trying her best" Amanda said. "She knows what to do, we're just having some trouble getting a stable field is all. I'm sure we can get there, it's just..."

"Enchanting something is a big step you know," Penelope replied. "You should leave yourself some smaller stuff too, so that you're not hitting a wall all the time."

"I guess," Amanda said. "But I've wanted to do this for so long. I can't give up now."

"I'm not saying give up," Penelope said as she looked down at Emilynn, "but maybe your little mouse just isn't made for enchantment. She *can* help you work on your summoning and binding skills, though. Help you get a bigger demon who's got the touch for crafting—"

"WE ARE A TEAM," Amanda said with the biggest frown as she picked her familiar back up. "I'm not going to ditch Emilynn for another demon! We can make it work, I'm sure of it!"

"Okay, okay," Penelope said, raising both hands. "You're a team. But remember, a pact is meant to be mutually beneficial. Your little friend

isn't going to feel very fulfilled if you can never get something working together. This isn't just about you."

Amanda looked hard at Penelope, looking like she was repeatedly holding back from breathing fire. The alchemist's words had hit a nerve. Finally, she turned around and headed out.

"Mandy," the older sister said, standing up.

"You know what mom always says," Amanda half-shouted as she made her way to the door, "if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything!"

Penelope said something in an appeasing voice, but Emilyynn couldn't quite make out the words over Amanda's vigorous stomping as she walked them both out the door.

Getting Faster

Amanda gently set Emilyynn down on the workshop's couch, then walked over to the stone slab and slammed her hands down on it. "Ugh!" she yelled out, "I can't believe she said that! I know it's not just about me, I know what a pact means! I know what I'm doing!" Neither her nor her familiar had made a peep for the whole ride home, but it had been clear the witch was seething. Now those pent-up feelings were being let loose.

It didn't take long for Amanda to calm down, however. She let herself fall back onto the couch. "This place matters a lot to me. You'd think she'd understand. It's been years and years and she still treats me like I'm a little kid." She paused for a moment, then gingerly rubbed her hands, looking back at the large block of stone she'd hit just moments earlier. "Ow. That really hurt."

Amanda took a deep breath, turning to look at her familiar. "I hope you're not feeling unfulfilled," she said softly. "That's the last thing I want."

Squeak! Emilyynn had to reassure her witch; she couldn't stand seeing her like this. She took one step forward and *poofed* into Amanda's hands, rubbing one palm with her cheek.

"Uh," the witch said, dumbfounded. "Emilyynn, what did you just do?"

Emilyynn stopped her display of affection. She slowly looked up at Amanda. *Squeak?* She hadn't even thought about it this time, she'd just... done it.

"Can you, uh," Amanda said, wide-eyed, "can you do that again?"

Squeak! The familiar turned around, picked a spot across the table, and *poofed* there in the blink of an eye, leaving little puffs of dark blue smoke at both ends of her little magic jump. She looked back at her witch expectantly. Amanda clapped her hands together.

"Oh my gosh, Emilyynn," she said, starry-eyed, "do you think... do you think you could do that when we're working? Would that help?" The demon mouse nodded emphatically. "Okay!" the witch said. She then paused for a pensive moment. "...Want to give it another shot right now?"

Squeak!

Amanda grinned, and prepared the workshop for another enchantment attempt. Anger had given way to excitement at the possibility of finally getting it right. A new variable had entered the equation and, with it, a renewed promise of everything working out.

Without words, they went through the preparations; the witch

preparing the focal item to be enchanted (still a metal nut), setting up the field, layering the spells, and the familiar holding it all together. They knew the process by heart now; the only difference was the multiplying little puffs of dark blue smoke in the room as Emilynn began poofing here and there, closing the gap between her and a problem spot instantly. As soon as the field began to show a sign of fragility she was there putting it back together.

Then the field began doing something she hadn't seen before. It pulsed; slowly at first, but then more and more rapidly, and began to shrink. There were no trouble spots that she could identify, so she froze, unsure what to do. And before she could react, the field shrank in on itself and vanished within the metal nut on the table.

...*Squeak*? Emilynn looked at the small object in the center of the stone slab. Had the field collapsed again? She had no idea how to fix it when it did that. A bit confused, she looked up at Amanda.

And she was BEAMING.

The witch picked up the focal item expectantly, holding it between the two of them. After a moment, it began to show that telltale magical glow. It was enchanted.

"WE DID IT!" Amanda shouted, jumping in place.

SQUEAK! Emilynn followed suit excitedly, relief washing over her. They'd done it! They'd enchanted something!

"Okay," Amanda said, tapping the metal nut on the stone table. It began to shine brightly; actual light this time, not just a magical aura. She tapped it again, and away the light went. "It's not the most amazing thing in the world, and I'm not sure I can sell it like this, exactly, but... We did it! We can do this! And now, we can start getting to work on building an inventory! Oh Emilynn, this is so exciting! I've been waiting for this for so long, and now it's here!" The witch picked her familiar up and gently cradled her in her arms, twirling around the workshop merrily.

Emilynn had never seen her so happy in their short time together. That was all it took to bring out the best in her: a victory, a success to hold onto. It was so inspiring to see the young witch all fired up like this, looking like she was ready to take on the world. To the small familiar, her previous life was all but forgotten; they were both in this together, and they were going to make this work.

But just a few days later, the demon mouse was back to comforting Amanda, gently rubbing her cheek against the witch's head as she lay down on the workshop couch. "Why is it so hard to make this work?" the witch asked loudly. "We had it! Why is everything so different as soon as you make a tiny change? It's not fair, Emilynn."

Squeak... Her familiar did her best to soothe her frustrations. It had been a bit of a surprise just how little carried over when it came time to

enchant something new. Keeping the field stable was a bit easier now thanks to Emilynn's newfound ability, but Amanda had quickly reached the limits of her spellcasting. Change the focal item and everything needed to be adjusted; change the effect, and the entire process had to be revised, along with having to learn a slew of new spells. The familiar wanted to offer words of encouragement, or make suggestions, but there was only so much she could get across with only squeaks, no matter how well her witch could understand her every sound.

Once Amanda got enough practice with a particular spell, she was a natural; but it took a lot of work to reach that point. And introducing so many new spells to a process she thought she'd mastered was hard on her ego. Still, this wasn't an entirely new problem to Emilynn; she'd tackled this sort of thing during one of her many attempts at starting up new projects, like the interview podcast or the online store. The fact that they had all failed was not lost on her, but she figured some lessons could still be salvaged.

It was so strange to think back to those times. They might as well have been a lifetime ago.

Emilynn considered the situation. Big changes were scary, but it was easier when you could compare them to something that worked and fill in the blanks; that way, you started with a solid foundation—which gave you confidence—instead of going in blindly. How could she prod Amanda into understanding this? She waited until a break and rearranged the workshop subtly between work sessions. Maybe putting two metal nuts together in the center would do it?

Amanda returned and, soon enough, she had an idea. "Hey Emilynn," she said, "what if we tried batch enchanting? These things might be worth it if we can make a lot at once. And that process shouldn't be too different from what we know!" Her familiar was very much on board. They proceeded to try enchanting two, then three, then a small group of metal nuts at the same time. It was easy enough that the successes kept coming, while still making progress. They then tried slightly different items, and slightly different variations on the spell—a colored light, a focused light, a disco ball effect—and slowly but surely the witch's confidence returned.

And as the days progressed and her motivation came back, Amanda set her sights on more practical goals. She gave Emilynn a tour of the store, both present and future; she'd had this planned out for a while. "And this here," she said as she held up her scribble-filled business notebook, "is how much stock we need to prepare for opening day. We can't sell out right away, that's bad! Even though it's not very likely. And this here is a list of stuff that the neighbors are gonna be into, because we need them! These items here are going to bring folks from the rest of the witches quarter, if we can get some good promos going... I think

we're good to make at least a couple of these with what we know now. The rest, well... we'll figure it out."

"Oh!" Amanda continued as she flipped to a different page, this time with cute little illustrations, "we need one of those in the window display! A real eye-catcher! Not sure which one to make, though. Gosh, a sword would be SO COOL, but the city's not gonna like it and I'll need a permit. I guess the staff would be safer. Or the harp, but I don't know how to play it. Anyway."

Despite Amanda's haphazard organization, there was a business plan behind the dream. And whenever something looked odd, or clashed with what Emilyynn had learned through her numerous startup failures, well, she'd 'accidentally' paw at the guilty pile of scribbles. Invariably, Amanda would explain the aspect in question to her curious familiar, and then pause, and realize what was wrong. And then she'd fix it.

They settled into a routine soon enough, as doing too much in any given day would wipe them out for the following two—and if Amanda tried something too difficult and failed, her motivation would bottom out for almost twice as long. Emilyynn did everything she could to make absolutely sure neither happened again. Their schedule had enchantment hours, training hours, time they spent preparing the store (so much dust!) and time they could relax. Though Amanda had lived there for a while now, she wasn't much of a tourist in her own neighborhood, and having Emilyynn around gave her an excuse to introduce her to the witches quarter—or at least her part of it.

The evenings gave them plenty of leisure time, with the witch taking surprised delight in just how much her familiar was getting into her favorite shows and looking at comic books over her shoulder. Emilyynn, for her part, was discovering how much all of this had been missing from her life. Waking up next to someone she cared about, working together toward a common goal, sharing little moments... Often, before drifting off to sleep, she wondered how she could ever live without it again. But the contract's end was still so far away; better not to think about it, and just focus on the present.

Days had turned into weeks. Emilyynn rested on the counter as Amanda arranged a display of the many different light-up items they'd made together, interspersed with some of the more interesting things on her list. The familiar was still surprised the two of them had managed to make those noise-canceling brooches; the enchantment field for them had defied what she knew of geometry. "Gosh Emilyynn," Amanda said as she leaned back against the counter, "opening day is starting to feel like a real thing now. It was always this weird nebulous thing, but now I think it's getting closer? Like I can almost touch it?" She sighed wistfully.

Squeak! Emilyynn tried to be positive. She desperately wanted to be there for the store's first day, in one form or another; her contract was

getting dangerously close to the halfway mark. She couldn't believe how quickly the days had passed. But that's what happened when you were happy, wasn't it? Time flew by. Maybe she could make an effort to be more mindful of it; make the days last longer. Forget the looming deadline.

"You know," Amanda said as she bent down to face the counter, putting herself face-to-face with the demon mouse, "making this store a reality has always been kind of my dream, but I never thought it could be something I'd share with someone. I've been wanting a familiar to help with enchanting things... And now I'm starting to see that there's a lot more to this than I expected." She smiled bashfully. "I guess I'm saying that I really appreciate you being here with me. You're pretty small, but thanks to you we can make pretty big things happen! So... thanks. You mean a lot to me." The witch grinned sweetly.

Squeak! Emilynn padded over and rubbed Amanda's cheek with her own. Her little heart was racing. The job she'd been hired for, Penelope's meticulous contract, none of those mattered right now. She was in a wonderful place with someone really special, and at that moment, it meant everything to her.

"I still think we can make that big centerpiece happen," Amanda said as she gently pet her familiar, "but I'm not sure if we need it for opening day. It can be its own special thing later, you know? I have something else planned that I could move up the list a bit. Still flashy, but a bit closer to what we know." The witch grinned again. "What do you think? Wanna get this store open sooner?"

SQUEAK!!

Cracking the Shell

Amanda leaned back in her chair, people-watching from her spot on the terrace of the little café three blocks down. Today was a big day, though Emilyynn didn't know exactly why; the witch was being playfully secretive about it. In the meantime, the familiar was playing a puzzle game, sliding the tip of her tail across the surface of Amanda's phone to match animal faces together. She had gotten a little more dextrous with it, but kind of wished it would've gotten more useful in a magical way. It had to be good for something, right? In the meantime, it did help with balance when scurrying around, so there was that.

The phone vibrated, a message pop-up pausing the game; Emilyynn stepped back so the witch could retrieve it. And sure enough, within seconds she seemed to be in a heated discussion with her sister, her fingers drumming across the lower third of the screen.

Amanda and Penelope hadn't quite made up so much as negotiated a sort of truce. There had been no new visits to Penny Pots since the first one. But at least they were communicating regularly, if somewhat tersely. "It's fine," the witch said, as if sensing Emilyynn's worry. "She's still worried about me. I've been telling her about all the progress we're making though, you'd think it'd make her happy. I even had to practice those basic exercises she keeps hounding me about. Eh, maybe we should drop by again, just to be nice. I could use a refill of some materials she keeps in stock." She looked at Emilyynn. "What do you think, Em?"

Squeak! The familiar enthusiastically wanted them to make up, and she was eager for Penelope to see her little sister's progress. Plus, she really liked it when Amanda called her that. It felt different when she said it.

"Haha, okay, I know you don't like watching us fight," the witch said as she scritched her familiar between the horns, "we'll drop by. After the big thing I've got planned! Soon as we're done here, we'll swing by my friend's store." The demon mouse replied in tiny satisfied squeaks.

The waiter came, handing Amanda her café au lait and Emilyynn her small cup of fresh blueberries, which she dove into earnestly. They both had learned how a little bit of relaxation and leisure in the morning could fire them up for the rest of the day.

They returned home soon enough, a mysterious new purchase in hand. Well, technically Amanda was the one carrying it, but Emilyynn had helped with moral support—despite having been sleeping off her meal since leaving the café. The witch quickly headed for the workshop, opening the box up as her familiar woke up. She held up a fancy-looking

comb; a mix of modern design with a bit of jewelry decorating the handle. The package itself contained several of them. The demon mouse was fascinated, if a bit puzzled.

"I got these for a steal thanks to my friend Zip's distributor connections," Amanda said with a giant smile. "They look cool, and most of the jewelry part is just for looks, but the bigger gem is genuine stuff. And that means it's perfect for a solid enchantment!" Emilyynn looked on with interest. "So picture this," the witch continued, "there's a color you like, but you're tired of going to the stylist. So—first step—you press something with the color you want against the gem here, and then—second step—you comb your hair. And it turns that color!"

Squeak! Emilyynn nodded appreciatively.

"It's a lot like Penny's hair color potion," Amanda said, "and a lot like the colored lights we've been making, so I can figure out how to get that effect going. But a potion, you drink once, and they usually don't last forever." Emilyynn squirmed absent-mindedly. "This is in a comb you own your whole life," the witch continued, "and you can use it repeatedly, AND you can change the color! Given what we're working with, it should probably take a day to recharge on its own between uses, so I think that's totally workable." She stepped to the doorway, looking into the shop part of the house. "This is what's going to replace our centerpiece. We can lay out the whole set in front, and maybe even get a mannequin with a wig for demonstrations! If it's anything like what they made us practice back in college, I can recharge our demo unit pretty easily if it gets popular."

Amanda rubbed her hands together. "I think this might turn heads and get word of mouth going, more than a sword or a staff. And if it gets really popular and becomes a flagship product, I can always order more, and we'll get an even better deal. Gosh, Emilyynn, this is so exciting! It's really happening!" She bounced back to the stone slab, leaning down to be face to face with her familiar. "I can't wait, I wanna try making the first one right now. Are you up for it?"

Squeak!!!

They cleared the table and got to work, Amanda strategically placing some open books nearby. "I know most of the spells," the witch said, "but almost all of them are variations, so I might have to keep checking my notes. That's not going to help the field at all, so it might get real tricky. Are you okay with that?" The mouse nodded with determination. "Okay good! And thanks. I'm glad I can count on you when I get like this, haha." She cracked her knuckles as her familiar did little stretches. "Here we go." They both got into position.

Right off the bat, Emilyynn could tell this would be difficult. The enchantment field started out reasonably stable, but due to various reasons—the increased amount of magic being pumped into it compared

to what she and Amanda were used to, the witch's inexperience with the spells being used, their first time working with a gem—things were getting out of hand fast. She did her best, *poofing* from problem spot to problem spot, smoothing things out as quickly as possible, but she could tell she was fighting a losing battle.

Still, she didn't give up, because Amanda wasn't giving up. She was clearly straining, putting as much effort as she could into every spell, correcting her magic circles on the fly. Trying this right off the bat had been foolhardy, but she wanted it to work; she needed it to work. Her motivation for the next several days depended on it.

Emilynn pushed herself as hard as she could. Besides, she only needed to last a little bit more than a month, so why be careful at this point? She tried not to linger too long on how grim that last thought had been. But something inside her told her this made a bit of sense. Up until now she'd been gentle; what if she went all-out? What would that feel like?

She threw care to the wind. She stopped carefully lining up her jumps, she stopped being gentle when smoothing out the enchantment field. She could be rough now; her witch needed her more than ever. What was a little injury, if it came to that? She could sleep it off once the magic had been sealed into the gem.

But it still wasn't enough. Emilynn couldn't accept it; she was doing her best, she was giving everything she had, and despite straining her little body to its limits, there was something holding her back. She couldn't put it in words; it was like a different limb, a phantom feeling somewhere deep inside: part of her was being restrained, encased, imprisoned. She'd always felt a sort of divide inside herself since waking up in this form, but she hadn't realized just how big the world inside her soul had gotten since meeting Amanda. It was like waking up one morning and looking out the window, only to find out that the small island you'd been living on all your life was suddenly a continent.

There was so much more she could do, if she could just crack open the window. Break it, if she had to.

She was on autopilot; rushing around the enchantment field in the blink of an eye, keeping everything as stable as she could. But her mind was elsewhere; in the world inside of herself, pushing against the limits of this shell that was keeping her from... something. Something she couldn't put her finger on. Something she wanted.

She kept pushing. Either it would break, or she would.

But in that moment, she was unbreakable.

She punched through the barrier holding so much of her back, and the outside world inside her soul came pouring in. It wasn't perfect, but it was enough. Her entire being filled with light, and she felt her limits explode outward. She saw the field for what it was; fragilities,

imperfections, trouble spots, all began to telegraph their presence seconds before they appeared. She was a blur around the stone slab, flying from one end to another effortlessly, her shoulders burning with the strain, her arms and legs stretching to tackle multiple problems at once. Her tail, suddenly having a mind of its own, sliced off and slapped down the field extrusions she couldn't see. She felt like she was everywhere at once; this enchantment was hers and hers alone to mess up now.

All Amanda needed was time and stability, and Emilyynn was going to give it to her.

She couldn't tell how much time had passed; could have been ten minutes, could have been ten seconds. But the field held, and shrank, and condensed into a freshly-sealed and enchanted magical item.

And she collapsed in a heap, her entire body burning with a fire not of this world.

The light filling her entire being went dark, and her consciousness with it.

Surprise

Emilynn awoke with a start. She was on Amanda's pillow, on the bed, snugly tucked into the covers. She was alone, but the water was running in the bathroom; her witch wasn't too far. She rubbed her face with a hand; what had happened?

She blinked in surprise. She had a hand.

She pulled back the covers, sitting up. She had... changed. Grown, too; she must have been twice her previous size. Her entire body was still covered in fur, but it looked much closer to a human body than before. Well, closer in some areas; she had hands, but hind paws still. And, well... she had curves. Her heart started beating faster. Penelope was right; she had grown into it. She couldn't quite process it, but... there was no denying it now. There was this overwhelming sense of amazement, of exhilaration. It was intense, to the point that she felt an urgent need to distract herself from this line of thought.

Reaching up, she could feel her horns—slightly bigger, maybe?—and her ears—still just as huge. The little tuft of hair on top of her head was now much longer, reaching down to her shoulder on one side. A lot like Amanda's.

She gently ran her fingers over her face. It was more... face-like. It was hard to tell without a mirror, but as she rolled her jaw experimentally and ran her tongue over her teeth (goodness, her fangs felt enormous), it all felt closer to what she remembered feeling before all this started. Strange how a few weeks might as well have been years now. She stood up; she could stand up now, without losing her balance. Her tail helped with that. She tried to remember the past few minutes, or hours, or however long it had been. What had happened?

Amanda gasped as she walked out of the bathroom, a damp towel in hand. She ran to the bed. "Emilynn!" she shouted in relief, crouching down next to her familiar.

"Amanda!" the mouse demon replied.

The witch's eyes went wide. She opened her mouth, slack-jawed. Emilynn gasped, reaching up to cover her mouth. Had she just...?

"Oh my gosh," they both said in unison. Amanda couldn't hold back her eager smile.

"Emilynn, you're okay!" the witch said. "And you can talk? Oh my gosh, what happened?"

"I... don't know," the familiar replied, sounding the words out experimentally. She had trouble recognizing the words she was saying as her own voice. It was tricky to talk after so long, but the process



felt different now; a little more difficult, but manageable. "It just... happened," she said. She couldn't stop herself from smiling. Amanda reached in for a hug.

"I'm so glad you're okay," the witch said, tearing up. "You pushed yourself so hard, I was so worried! We finished the comb, and you collapsed, and... you were burning up so much, I didn't know what to do. But I read up on it, and I guess this is what happens when demons evolve?"

"I... evolved?" Emilyynn replied, confused. Maybe that's what had happened. Was this something demons did normally? Why hadn't Penelope warned her about it? It felt like a very important thing to leave out. But for now, she tried not to worry about all this. She was just glad she could return Amanda's hugs now, albeit in a limited way; she was still, comparatively, very small in her arms.

"Look at you," the witch said, sitting back up. "You're all grown up, haha! With your hair, and your wings, and—"

"Wings?!" Emilyynn said, looking back. She had wings. Tiny, bat-like, dark blue wings, that certainly didn't look anywhere big enough to let her fly, but... she had wings. They flexed and fluttered a little bit as she tried moving muscles she'd never had before.

"I guess you're full of surprises for the both of us, huh?" Amanda said, staying close. She was calming down, relief washing away the signs of a deep worry that had been there for some time. "Oh," she continued, "you dropped this!" She handed back the bright pink ribbon bow, half-untied, that must have been misplaced at some point.

Emilyynn took it. It certainly wouldn't fit the way it had before, but she still wanted to wear it. Its sentimental value was too strong by now. Maybe it would work as... ah ha! She slung it around her hips a couple times, tightening the bow behind her back. It could do the job well enough as a makeshift skirt. Amanda smiled.

"Gosh, there's so much I want to ask you," the witch said. "But you're probably tired, right? Or hungry?" She was visibly fighting her curiosity, not wanting to overwhelm her familiar. But Emilyynn could tell there was a lot on her mind. What could she possibly tell her, though? Penelope hadn't briefed her on anything. Should she lie?

Could she lie?

"I... am hungry. A bit," Emilyynn replied with a sheepish grin. She should probably check in with Penelope as soon as possible, lest she say something she shouldn't.

"Okay!" Amanda said, getting up. "Enchanting made me hungry too and I haven't been able to eat all afternoon. I'll get us something. And, uh... do you feel well enough to go to see my sister with me? I never really read much about this, and Penny's the familiar expert between the two of us. I can be mad at her later."

"Yes!" Emilynn said, perhaps a little too enthusiastically. That had been easy enough!

Amanda stood up, heading to the kitchen. The familiar carefully stood up as well, walking across the bed, testing out her new legs. She was really glad her tail was pulling her weight still, as she didn't know how she'd keep her balance otherwise. Before she could think better of it, she looked up at the shelf separating the sleeping area from the rest of the studio and *poofed* on top of it, tagging along after Amanda.

At least, she'd been aiming for the shelf; something was off now, her size and weight different enough to require some adjustment and retraining. She missed the shelf, appearing in midair with nothing below her feet. She flailed, frantically searching for somewhere else to jump, wondering if... and then she lost her train of thought as she floated down gently, her little wings fluttering enthusiastically. She half-hovered, half-glided to the shelf and grabbed on, pulling herself up. That was new. And sort of amazing. She'd have work on her form a bit, but... so far, she was really liking these new additions. She quickly closed the rest of the distance between herself and Amanda, eager to help prepare (and eat) whatever dinner was in the works.

"Hey Em," the witch asked as she cleaned up after they were both done, "what was the otherworld like?" The familiar froze, her tiny napkin held up over her mouth.

"Uh," she began as her mind raced. What could she say? She hadn't read up on that at all. Was it always on fire? No, some stories described it as an infinite web of caves. Or was it a hollow world? She couldn't just make it up. Oh! Oh wait! "I... don't know," the familiar said sheepishly. "I don't... remember it at all." There. Amnesia. It wouldn't be the first time she'd started a story that way, but part of her hoped it'd be the last. It wasn't technically a lie, right? She didn't remember the otherworld, because she'd never been there.

"Oh no," Amanda said with a sad frown. "I'm so sorry! I hope it wasn't because of my crummy circle... I've had a really hard time getting a stable summoning portal to hold. It's a miracle the last one even worked." She tried to smile a little.

"No, no!" Emilynn replied, waving her hands emphatically. "It's okay! I have... good memories now." She smiled, blushing a bit. Maybe that had been a little too much to just say out loud like that. But Amanda immediately leaned in for a hug. And Amanda hugs were the most soothing balm for the little familiar's soul right now.

"Hey," the witch said quietly, "you pushed yourself really hard back there, right? I don't know a lot about how demons evolve, but I do know that it takes a big event, and a lot of energy."

Emilynn nodded. She... hadn't been careful at all. In fact, she'd never pushed so dramatically past her limits in her entire life. She could've

gotten hurt, or worse. And now, looking back on it, it worried her that she hadn't cared at all about the possibility of that happening.

Amanda squeezed her tightly. "Please don't hurt yourself for my sake, or for our work's sake, or for anything else, okay? It looks like something good came out of it this time, but... none of it is worth losing you. Okay?"

"Okay," Emilynn said, returning the hug. She didn't want to worry Amanda. And now, more than ever, she wanted to be at her best so she could enjoy the time they had together. She tried to hold back tears, to no avail.

Amanda let go, smiling down at her. She hadn't been able to stop herself from crying either.

The ride to Penny Pots was uneventful, giving them both some time to recover. Emilynn was still barely small enough to sit on Amanda's shoulder, but she was much more conscious of the eyes on her now. It felt different now that no one could possibly mistake her for a pet rodent. She clung onto her witch for protection, but it was really comfort she was after. The closer she was, the less her worries had any power over her.

"Hey Penny," Amanda said as she pushed the door and made her way into the alchemist's shop. But there was no one present. Well, no humans, at least. "I can't believe she's never at the counter," she added, shaking her head. "I'll go get her. Stay here, okay? I kinda want to set her up for a surprise." The witch smiled as she gently helped her familiar down onto Esmeralda's empty cushion, then walked off into the maze of side rooms.

Emilynn sat down. The place felt empty without the big cat. Well, no, not so big anymore; it would be fun to be the taller familiar for once. She doubted the height difference would be that remarkable, but a playful part of her wanted to relish in it, if only for a moment.

Right on cue, she heard the tell-tale pitter-patter of cat paws making their way over; no doubt the cat had heard Amanda and deduced where her mouse would be. Esmeralda hopped onto the cushion. Her eyes widened in surprise, even the third one.

"Hi Esmeralda," Emilynn said with a grin as she stood up. She was maybe half a head taller, but it still counted.

The cat quickly recovered, then returned the grin. In a second, her hair unfurled and engulfed the rest of her body, masking it in a shifting mass of locks. The mouse paled, her gaze following the shapeless form up as it grew. The fur then stopped, receded, and revealed a different, somewhat more humanoid Esmeralda: standing upright, hands on her hips, a waterfall of hair flowing down to her midsection.

"Ah," Emilynn said meekly.

"Well hello there, little mouse," the taller cat said, flashing her

fangs. "You're just full of surprises, aren't you." Her tail swished behind her playfully, sometimes separating into multiple braids of fur before merging back into a single limb.

"You, uh, uh," Emilyynn sputtered, "you can... do that too?" She hadn't even gotten to enjoy being the taller one for more than a second. The cat reached over and patted her gently on the head, careful to avoid her horns.

"I should be the one saying that," Esmeralda said, clearly enjoying this. "You've been learning new tricks awfully quick. Though I suppose it's been a while since you visited."

"W-wait," the mouse said in sudden realization, "you can change? Like... change back?" The cat blinked, taken aback for a brief moment.

"Of course," she said matter-of-factly. "When you learn something new, you don't forget what was there before it." Emilyynn looked down at herself, then back at Esmeralda.

"Can I... do that too?" she asked.

"I'm sure you'll figure it out," the cat replied with a smile. "You seem to be good at that." She turned her head as two sets of footsteps approached. "Well," she said, "fun's over. I'm sure she'll want to talk to you." She turned back to Emilyynn, patting her on the head again for good measure. "Don't be a stranger now." And with that, she shrank back into the mass of shifting hair that turned into her smaller cat form, and promptly curled up on the cushion.

"Just head on over to the counter, I have something for you," Amanda said as she walked over to Emilyynn and carefully helped her up onto her shoulder. "Oh this is going to be great," she whispered to her familiar. "I get to be the one to surprise her this time. Bet she didn't think we'd do so much so fast, haha!" The mouse nodded hesitantly. She wasn't sure Penelope liked surprises. But then again, she hadn't known her for very long, had she? Amanda walked them both over to the counter, where Penelope was just getting seated.

"You don't have to make it up to me," the older sister said, "I told you, it's fine, we're f—"

She stared at Emilyynn, then Amanda, then back to Emilyynn. Her face went pale. She looked like she'd seen a ghost.

"Surprise!" the younger sister said cheerfully. "We enchanted a ton of stuff AND Emilyynn evolved! How's that for results?"

"H-hi," the familiar said sheepishly. Penelope continued to stare, unblinking. She turned her head towards her sister but kept her gaze on the mouse.

"What happened?" the alchemist witch said with superhuman restraint.

Amanda launched into an excited retelling of the past few weeks but it was clear to Emilyynn that Penelope was listening to none of it. She sat

there, eyebrows slightly twitching; the familiar could practically feel her mind racing from across the counter. Finally, the older witch raised her hand, interrupting Amanda's explanation.

"Hey Mandy," she said with a measured tone, "I haven't had the chance to see a demon so soon after an evolution like this. Could I bring her into my lab one moment? I want to check something, run some tests. Make sure she's okay."

"Uh, sure," Amanda said. "That's kinda why we came over here so soon. She was out for most of the afternoon, so I was wor—"

"Okay good, thanks," Penelope said, holding out her hands. Emilyynn hesitantly climbed on, the alchemist wasting no time before hurrying into the back. "I'll be right back," she said as she speed-walked into the hallway, "make yourself comfortable."

"Uh, okay!" Amanda yelled out with a hint of confusion.

Penelope walked into her lab, slammed the door, locked it, and put Emilyynn down onto the counter in one uninterrupted motion. The demon mouse looked around, immediately remembering what had happened last time she was here. She didn't like this place. She turned back to see the alchemist loom over her.

"WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED?!" the witch bellowed, her voice full of panicked fury.

Going Back

Emilynn fell to the counter in shock, scooting backwards away from the angry alchemist. "Wh-what?" she said meekly.

"What. Happened?" Penelope asked, slamming a hand down on the counter after each word. The demon mouse hit the wall, stopped in her tracks.

"I... don't know!" Emilynn replied, straining to speak out the words.

"You evolved!" the alchemist shouted. "How did you evolve?!"

"I... I don't know!" the demon mouse said. "I didn't know this could happen! Why didn't you tell me—"

"I *told* you not to get attached!" Penelope said. "Demons don't evolve unless they have a strong bond with a witch. And even then it takes them at least six months! So I halved it to three for your contract, just to be safe. And it took you half that! There's no way you should've been able to do this, let alone so fast! I made sure of that!"

"There was... something holding me back," Emilynn said, starting to suspect something. "I pushed. I pushed through it, and—"

"You did what?!" Penelope shouted. "That was for your protection! It was the seal keeping you safe! Don't you realize what you've done? I told you deep inside, you'd still be human, and that I'd bring that part back out when we were done. Remember that? Well I can't anymore. You broke it."

"Wh... what?" Emilynn whispered back as she started to shake, her heart threatening to beat its way out of her chest. Penelope buried her face in her hands, then flipped her hair back as she stood up straight again.

"I had another potion set up and everything," the witch continued. "Wasted, now. Don't you get how serious this is? I'm going to have to call in favors, now. Special order rare materials. This is going to take so much more effort. And for what? Why? So you could be the hero? I'm paying you to help my sister learn to summon a real demon, not indulge her fairy tale item shop fantasies!"

"H-hey," Emilynn said as she stood back up, "it's not a fantasy! She's doing her best, she's making it work!"

"She'll be right back where she started the moment you leave though, won't she? Have you thought about that?" Penelope asked, crossing her arms. "It's been weeks and she barely got any closer to learning how to summon a familiar of her own. She practically hasn't touched her basics, despite all my prodding. And why would she? She loves you! Do you know how much harder it's going to be for me to

convince her to ditch you and get something better?"

"Hey!" the familiar said, bristling at the insult. But something else the witch had just said echoed and repeated in her head before everything else paled in comparison. "Wait. She..." Emilyynn added softly, "she loves me?" Penelope's demeanor changed from frustrated to dumbfounded.

"Oh no," the witch said, shaking her head, "no, no, no, you're not doing this. This has to stop here and now, before it goes any further."

"What?" the familiar said. "Wait! I still have at least a month! She's so close to getting the store set up! I just need to help her enchant a few more things! And, and I know how to make sure she takes breaks, and doesn't set herself up for failure, and—"

"Listen to yourself!" Penelope said, looking down at Emilyynn incredulously. "Do you really think that's you speaking right now? Pacts weren't made for people pretending to be familiars, it's messing with your head. You're so far gone you don't even sound like a human being anymore. You're not a demon! You're not a naive girl's pet! You've got a life to go back to! Does none of this matter to you?"

"She's not a naive girl," the familiar said sternly as she stared the witch down. "She's my witch and she needs me, just like I need her." Penelope stared back, shaking her head in disbelief. There was silence between the two of them for a long moment.

"What's your name?" the witch finally asked.

"Emilyynn," the familiar answered.

"That's what she calls you," Penelope said, narrowing her eyes. "What's your *name*?"

"My *name* is Emilyynn," the familiar answered. She knew where the witch was going with this and she wasn't going to let her win. That name meant a lot to her.

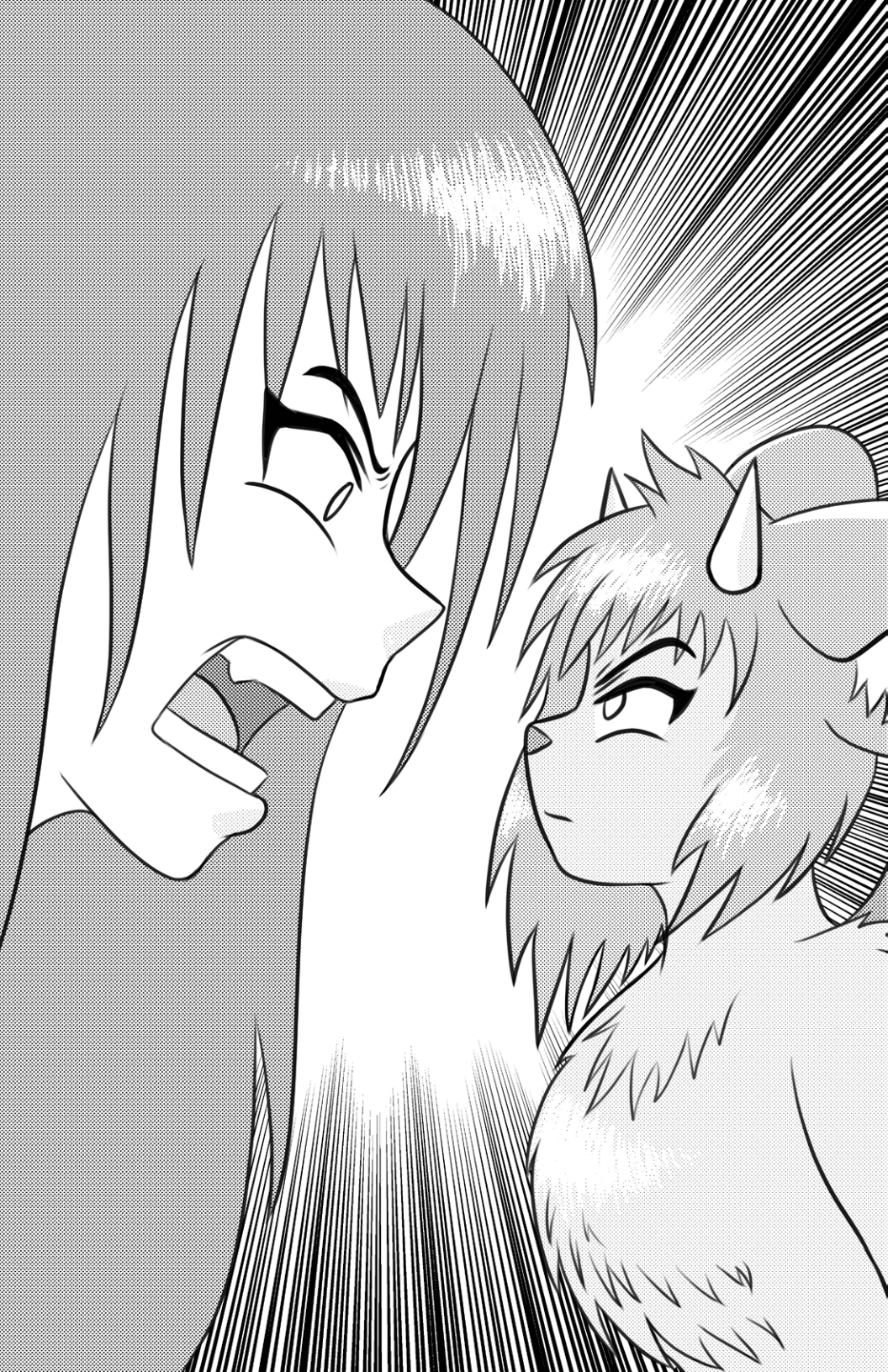
"Tell me the name you had when you first came to my store!" Penelope said, her voice rising.

"Fine!" Emilyynn said, raising her voice in response. "It's Em! Happy now?" It might sound the same to the alchemist's ears, but the demon mouse was using it like Amanda did: to refer to her, now, with none of the old baggage. She wasn't going to play Penelope's game.

"That's a nickname!" the witch yelled, making the mouse jump with a start. She flung her hand to the side in a flurry of angry gestures; the safe in the corner of the lab twitched, then burst open, scattering documents across half the room. One of them landed in the alchemist's outstretched hand. She held it up in front of the familiar; it was the contract she'd signed on her first visit. Penelope's finger was covering the part where Emilyynn had written her name down.

She'd almost forgotten that had happened.

"What is the NAME on this form?" the witch practically shouted. The familiar's blood was boiling; this was petty and unnecessary and solely



intended to hurt her. But fine. Fine! If that's what it took to shut her up, fine!

"It's...!" Emilyynn shouted back. Her eyes went wide. "It's...!" she repeated. "It's... Em!" she said, frantically. She looked down. What was happening? She knew it, why couldn't she say it? She... she knew it, right? Why would she forget that? It was right there! "Em... Emi... lynn..." she said, each syllable making the look of terror on her face grow. She looked back up at Penelope; the witch was stone-faced. "Em... Emilyynn," she said in a whisper, hugging herself, her legs shaking. It wasn't there. Try as she did to remember it, it was just... missing. All she could recall was Emilyynn, and she knew she wasn't called that before. Was she? That didn't make any sense. ...Did it?

Penelope dropped the contract and crouched down, crossing her arms on the counter as she leaned forward. Whatever hostility had been on her face was gone, replaced by a mix of pity and compassion. "Do you see now?" she asked softly. "It's starting to affect your true name. The demon part is seeping in. It's only going to get worse the longer you stay with her."

Emilyynn looked back up at the witch, mouth agape. She didn't know what any of that meant. All she understood was that a part of her was missing; one she didn't care for, certainly, but there was a gaping hole in its place, one she didn't know how to deal with, and that was terrifying. And it was going to get worse. What else was she going to lose? She didn't want to have to pick between parts of herself or staying with Amanda. That wasn't fair. That wasn't fair at all.

"Now will you listen to me?" Penelope said, a bit more forcefully. "This has to stop. Here and now. If it goes any further, there won't be a 'you' to go back to."

Emilyynn leaned back against the wall again. She wanted to say something, anything, but the words wouldn't come out. This wasn't happening. This couldn't happen. They still had over a month left together! It wasn't fair, it couldn't just end like this!

"Now come with me," Penelope said, standing back up. "I'll get you somewhere safe. We'll turn this around."

Emilyynn shook her head. She opened her mouth, but couldn't speak. The witch, meanwhile, had no patience left. She stepped forward and reached out to the frightened mouse.

"Come with me," Penelope repeated firmly, beckoning Emilyynn to take her hand.

Emilyynn looked away, to the side, anywhere but at the witch, trying to find a way out.

"COME WITH ME!" the alchemist shouted, shoving her hand closer—*Squeak!!*

Her fingers met fog and smoke. The familiar was gone.

Time Out

Emilynn huddled in the corner, away from the light slipping through the gaps in the trellis walls around her. She sat there, gently shaking, her sobs interspersed with soft squeaks. She couldn't remember her name. She couldn't even speak, now. What was happening to her? She just wanted to run into Amanda's arms and leave this place. But what if Penelope caught her first? She'd never let her see her witch again, she was sure of it. And by now the alchemist had probably worked out a way to stop her jumps, too.

Maybe she should just stay in this place forever. It was nice after all; Esmeralda's smell was all over it.

"There you are," the cat said from out of nowhere, as if reading the mouse's thoughts. "They're looking for you, you know. Penelope lost track of you while doing a routine exam, or so the story goes." She silently poured herself into rivers of fur through the gaps in the wooden slats, coming together in her taller form to sit next to Emilynn, against the wall. The smaller familiar looked up at her briefly, trying to choke back the tears.

All she could manage was a pitiful *squeak*.

"Oh, hon," Esmeralda said as she gently put an arm around the sobbing mouse's shoulder. "Am I going to have to speak some sense into my overbearing partner?" Emilynn looked up at her, not sure what to make of this. "Oh don't look so surprised, she needs to get taken down a peg every so often. I'm only too happy to oblige." She ruffled the smaller familiar's hair a tiny bit. "Besides, no one makes a young lady cry and gets away with it."

Emilynn gave the cat a smile, her face going red despite the fur. The tears had stopped, at least.

"What foolish thing did she say to you?" Esmeralda asked.

...*Squeak*. Emilynn buried her face in her hands. She was still so upset. About everything that had happened, about losing her voice, losing her memory, losing... No, she wasn't lost yet. Penelope didn't get to decide every aspect of her life, contract or not. She took a deep breath and looked up at Esmeralda. "I can't..." she struggled to say, tears streaming down her cheeks again. "I can't... remember... my name."

"What, Emilynn?" the cat asked, tilting her head.

"No," the mouse replied, "my... my old one..."

"Oh," Esmeralda said, taken aback. "Did Penelope do that?" she asked as her eyes narrowed and her fur began to bristle.

"N-no," Emilynn answered, "she... she said... my true name is

changing."

"Ahhh," the cat said, her demeanor softening. "That'll do it." The mouse just stared at her, blinking away the tears.

"How?" the smaller familiar asked. "What's... what's a true name?"

"Sounds like someone didn't do her homework," Esmeralda said as she lightly booped Emilynn on the nose, making the mouse smile sheepishly despite herself. "You know the story about the princess and the frog, right? Prince gets cursed and turned into a frog, and the kiss of a princess dispels the curse." The mouse nodded. "So. Princess kisses frog. Curse is dispelled. How does the prince get turned back?"

Emilynn furrowed her brow.

"The curse won't do it," Esmeralda continued, "it's gone, dispelled. So what then? Well, the short answer is, magic does it. There's a sort of vacuum left by the curse going away, and magic wants to fill it. And to do so, it looks at the prince's true name. It's sort of a recipe, in a way. It tells magic exactly what's supposed to be there, so magic goes 'oh okay' and makes the prince again. In truth, it's a bit more complex than that, but that's the simple version."

Emilynn nodded, sort of getting it.

"Humans make a big deal about names, so what they get called gets tangled up in their sense of self, their recipe, their true name. And that's fine, because human true names aren't meant to change. Not naturally, at least."

"I... I see," Emilynn said, starting to understand.

"Us demons," Esmeralda continued as she looked the smaller familiar in the eye, "we come from a different place. Our true names are malleable, to a point. Because we're full of potential, but we don't know it yet. We've got room to grow, and our name has room to change. My true name now is different from the one I was born with. I didn't need the old one anymore; I grew beyond it." She leaned in closer. "Like you're starting to do with your true name. You're leaving it behind, along with everything tied to it, like your old name. There's something new growing inside you, waiting to take over. If you let it."

Emilynn looked up at the cat, opening her mouth, then closing it, then trying again. "Does that mean... that I'm a...?" she began asking, unable to finish the question. Esmeralda gave her a long look.

"True names change and grow," the larger familiar said, "but they take a while to set. There's no reason yours can't be put back the way it was before it... solidifies, so to speak. Penelope's always in a hurry, thinking the world's going to end tomorrow, but in my experience this sort of thing takes time." The cat looked at Emilynn. "Up to you which one of us you believe on that. Your case is an unusual one, after all." She shrugged. "What do I know?"

The demon mouse nodded, looking down. She took another deep

breath. Things were starting to look a little less desperate, but the weight of it all was starting to press down on her. This had turned from a scary accident to a terrifyingly important decision. But she wasn't alone, and she didn't have to make it right away.

Emilynn leaned closer, just a little bit, with great hesitation, and Esmeralda pulled her in, gently stroking her back. The mouse wanted to thank her, but all that came out was a *squeak*.

"It's alright," the larger familiar whispered, "we don't need to talk right now, either. Tell you what. We'll let you relax a little bit more, and then I'll go get my stubborn pact mate out of your way so you and your witch can leave. I'll teach her some patience, so you can take your time and feel all this out."

Emilynn nodded, hugging the cat tightly. She was so grateful for the cat's comfort and company. Thank goodness Penelope had a familiar like her.

"You won't have too long," Esmeralda said, "but you should have enough. And that's all anyone can hope for, really."

Coffee Break

Amanda walked into the coffee shop, Emilynn sitting on her shoulder. She hung her hat among the others—keeping her jacket because she was a bit chilly still—and headed over to pick a spot near the center, sitting down. Her familiar hugged the witch's arm tightly as she was let down onto the table. She'd been particularly clingy lately. Letting go was hard.

Penelope hadn't said anything about what had actually happened in the lab. But how could she, really? It was her secret as much as Emilynn's. Esmeralda had distracted the alchemist as promised, and Amanda returned home none the wiser, her familiar in tow. She'd promised Emilynn never to have her examined again, now that she knew how scared she was of laboratories. The demon mouse could only agree; it was the truth, after all. She never wanted to see a lab again.

"I'm not sure if they have what you like here, Em, but I'll make it work!" Amanda said as she picked up the menu. Emilynn gently picked up one of the empty cups and turned it upside-down to use as a seat, and took a moment to look around. She'd been here before; this was Leslie's favorite place to get coffee, worth going all the way to the witches quarter for. That's what they used to tell her every time. She still wasn't sure if they liked coming here for the coffee or for the witch-watching.

Emilynn glanced at the pets a few of the other patrons had brought. She looked closer. That dog had wings, same color as his fur. The crow was crafting complex three-dimensional sculptures of light with her beak. That snake had antlers covered in shimmering scales. It was surreal just how much beauty there was in the world, all around her, and up until now she just hadn't been looking for it.

"Em?" Amanda asked.

"Huh?" the familiar said, broken out of her reverie. The witch had the menu open on the sides page. "Oh! Sorry!" Emilynn said, taking a peek.

"It's okay!" Amanda said. "They have—"

"Ooh, baby carrots!" the demon mouse said a little loudly as she spotted a favorite in the lengthy list of options.

The witch gave her a long look that made Emilynn pause. Did she act out of line? She hadn't meant to interrupt her, she just got a little carried away. Before, the familiar had no trouble understanding her mood, but now Amanda felt harder and harder to read. It was difficult to connect emotionally when your own heart was in a dozen different places at once.

"Okay," the witch finally said, with a little smile. Emilynn sat back down, still lost in thought. They had so little time left together. They'd kept up the enchanting work for the past few days, but the demon mouse's mind was elsewhere. Still, with her evolved abilities, it had gotten much easier to hold up her side of it, so it didn't affect the work too much. But she hated this. She should be enjoying every moment, not lamenting how few were left. She could tell that Amanda was eager to talk with her now that they could have conversations, but every time, Em shied away. She was so scared of saying the wrong thing.

"You've been very spacey lately," the witch said with a smile that belied her worry. "Everything okay, Em?"

"Not really," the familiar answered, looking down at the table. That was the best way to put it; anything else would've been a lie. But she couldn't just leave it at that, or there'd be questions she didn't want to answer. "It's... a lot of changes. I'm scared... a little."

"Aw," Amanda said, visibly searching for what to say. She reached out with a hand; Emilynn hugged it, gently rubbing her head against it.

"I'm... I..." the familiar said, struggling to get the words out. "I... forgot things. Small things, that... don't really matter. Esmeralda says it happens. It's... an evolution thing. But... it's scary."

"Oh my gosh," the witch said quietly. "Have you been worrying about that this whole time? I had no idea evolving was so serious." She brought her other hand up to gently stroke Emilynn's head. "I'm here, okay? The amnesia didn't stop you and this won't either. I'm gonna be here to remind you, every day."

The familiar looked up at her witch. She was still thinking about that throwaway amnesia story from before. Emilynn had felt so clever when she came up with it, but now she saw it hadn't helped anything. All it had done was make Amanda worry about her more. Tears welled up in the demon mouse's eyes. What good was a familiar who made her witch feel worse? She didn't deserve her.

"We make magic together," Amanda continued, teary-eyed, and gently brought her in for a hug. "I'll find a way. I won't let you forget."

"I don't want to lose you!" Emilynn said as she burst into tears, holding onto her witch as tightly as she could. There was no purer truth, even though Amanda wouldn't understand exactly what she meant by it. The familiar didn't want to forget her, of course, but she didn't want to spend one moment apart from her either. She couldn't imagine life without her. And throughout it all, she couldn't shake the passing remark that Penelope had made: that mundane humans weren't meant to be in pacts with witches, that it was overpowering her, going to her head. She didn't want to believe it. But she couldn't dismiss it entirely, either. What if all this was the pact's doing? Did she feel worse about her emotions being manipulated, or the possibility that when her contract ended, so

would all her feelings for Amanda?

The two of them held onto each other for a while, letting the tears flow. Emilyynn heard the waitress come in to check in on them, and return with their order, along with a box of tissues. Amanda's friend was late by now, but that was okay. They both could have this moment to themselves a while longer.

They gently released their hold on each other, eventually. The tears had helped. They smiled, a little sheepishly, and Amanda got acquainted with her coffee and scone. Emilyynn, meanwhile, went back to her seat and picked up a baby carrot. It was a little trickier to eat whole with the teeth she had now. Maybe if she had a tiny knife? Or, well—could she do the same thing she'd done with the little excessive bits of enchantment field when her hands were full? She brought her tail around and tapped a carrot with it. Maybe if she concentrated, she could get the same effect going—

CHOP.

The thin coating of magic along the pointed tip of her tail cut a slice off the vegetable. Success! Emilyynn picked it up and bit into it with a satisfying crunch. She liked making these tiny discoveries. It made her feel clever. She repeated the motion again, getting absorbed into the act of efficiently making little baby carrot slices.

"Hey Amanda!" the witch's friend said before sitting down in the empty seat. "Sorry I'm late! You wouldn't believe the traffic, and also how late I got out of bed."

"Oh no worries!" Amanda replied, "I'm so glad you made it! You came at just the right time honestly, haha." She gently wiggled a finger in Emilyynn's field of view to grab her attention. "Em, meet my friend Leslie!"

The familiar sat bolt upright, looking up at the new arrival. She got to see Leslie's face the moment it shifted from cheerful to barely contained surprise. The demon mouse stared back, wide-eyed and mouth agape. That settled it; they knew. It's just like Emilyynn thought; their last meeting had been an interview all along.

"M!?" Leslie said before making a concentrated effort to put on a relaxed expression.

"Sh-short for Emilyynn!" the familiar said, forcing an awkward smile. "Hi!"

"...Hi!" the green-haired flustered friend replied.

Emilyynn quickly looked to Amanda, who didn't seem to notice anything was amiss. Leslie knew, of course, but apparently they hadn't been briefed on the details. They absolutely knew they had to keep this a secret, though, which was a huge relief. Sort of.

"I'm sorry," Leslie continued, "I just wasn't expecting..."

"Oh, right! She evolved a few days ago!" Amanda said. "I've been



kinda busy and forgot to post about it, haha. I kinda went into hermit mode once I started working on store stuff." She scratched the short-haired side of her head self-consciously.

"It's fine!" Leslie said, "it happens! I'm just glad I can report back that you are, indeed, alive and well. And with a cute friend!" Emilyynn went back to her carrot slices, her face red.

The witch and her friend caught up, making small talk as the demon mouse ate silently. Emilyynn wanted to talk to Leslie so badly; they were her closest link to the outside world, her life before. Maybe they could tell if she'd been affected by the pact? Maybe they could help her figure things out. But she'd need time alone with them, and that'd be tricky. Still... this was a coffee shop.

"I'll be right back!" Amanda said, heading for the bathroom. "Emilyynn, can you keep Leslie company?" she asked with a hint of playfulness in her voice.

The familiar and her friend immediately looked at each other, then looked back at the departing witch, waiting until the bathroom door had closed. Then back at each other.

"Leslie!" Emilyynn said, standing up.

"Em!" Leslie said, fascinated by her friend's current form. "Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry, I never made the connection! When she filled me in about this whole thing, I figured Penelope was talking about another witch! I never imagined... Uh, how are you? Everything going well?"

"No," Emilyynn replied, visibly upset. They had so little time. "I'm... I did what Penelope asked, and I helped Amanda with her magic, but she wanted to enchant things, so I helped with that too, and we got closer and worked together really well, and then I learned some magic, and evolved, and..." She stopped to take a breath. "Penelope got mad. She said I screwed up. That it'd be hard to turn me back now. That if I stay with Amanda I'll never be human again. That the pact went to my head and I'm not myself anymore. But... I don't know! I don't care! I wanna be with her! I wanna stay with her!"

She was racing against time; she was getting upset, her heart was racing, and soon she'd lose her words again. She had to get it all out now. "But I'm scared! I'm scared about forgetting my name, I'm scared that I don't care if I never turn back, I'm scared that it might not be me thinking all this, I'm scared of losing this, losing her, losing these feelings..." Tears were streaming down her cheeks again, but she kept talking. "I'm scared she'll find out about all this and I'll lose her. I love her. I love her! I don't know what to do!" She paced back and forth in a panic, struggling for every word. "Leslie, what do I do? Help! Please help! Please! *Squeak!*" Emilyynn collapsed on her knees, her breath ragged, her heart beating like a drum, her voice dissolving into little high-pitched noises. She looked up at her friend.

"Uh," Leslie said, stunned. They stayed silent for a long moment. "Em, that's... wow," they finally said. "Listen, I... I can't just..."

Emilynn scrambled back to her seat as Amanda returned. The familiar dove into her carrot slices eagerly, trying to calm down, hoping her witch wouldn't notice anything was amiss.

"Uh, welcome back," Leslie said.

"Did you have a good conversation?" Amanda said with a smile.

"Ah, yeah, sure did," her friend answered, awkwardly trying to avoid eye contact. They motioned to the barista, who nodded and got started on a drink.

"So what have you been up to?" the witch asked, idly scratching her familiar's head with a finger. Emilynn suddenly found her carrots much less interesting. "Are you still house-sitting?"

"Yeah, a bit," Leslie said, getting back into the groove of the conversation. "I mean it's not a lot of work, mostly taking care of plants, the mail, making sure the place is okay..."

"I mean, it's still work, it counts!" Amanda said.

"Sure, sure," Leslie said. They looked at Emilynn, then back to the witch. "I'm happy to do it because it's for a friend, you know?"

"Of course. Are they traveling?" Amanda asked, pulling her hand back from her familiar to devote her full attention to her coffee.

"Yeah. Actually," Leslie said before taking a deep breath, "it sounds like it might turn into something serious. My friend, she got this once-in-a-lifetime offer and took it, and at first it seemed like a neat distraction?" Emilynn looked up, freezing mid-bite. "But as I hear her talk about it I'm starting to think it's one of those things where you try on a new life for a bit, and suddenly you wonder if it suits you better than your old one."

"Haha, I know that feeling!" Amanda said. "That's a big one. I mean, I get how scary it is at first. And, like, there's no one-size-fits-all, is there? How's she taking it?"

"She's... nervous," Leslie said. "But it sounds like she's working through it. I wanna help, but it's hard to give that sort of advice, you know? Sometimes it's just a fling and you gotta listen to that voice that says it's not a sustainable thing, but... sometimes you go searching for a distraction, and you find yourself instead."

"Yeah," Amanda said wistfully. "It's scary to let go of the past. But I guess I lucked out; I had a crisis, and in that moment I knew which was more important to me. Still, it's kinda better when life decisions don't have to rely on a cataclysmic event." She took a long sip. "Gosh, best of luck to your friend! Whatever happens, I hope she finds something that makes her happy."

"Yeah," Leslie said as the waitress brought over their usual cup of coffee. They picked it up, blowing gently across its surface. "Me too."

Squeak.

Chat Among the Stars

Emilynn laid down on the sofa, looking up at the workshop ceiling. By this point it was criss-crossed with magical scoring, little scratches and dents made by miscast spells or lingering slivers of enchantment fields that never quite settled. At this time of day, it looked a bit like stars.

Amanda was upstairs getting ready for bed, and soon enough the familiar would go join her. But she'd needed those moments alone for the past few days, and she liked spending them on the workshop couch where her witch had left so much of her smell. She didn't want to think too deeply about all the stressful things in her life when her witch was around; she'd brought her mood down enough times already.

She didn't know how much time she had, but it had to be very little at this point.

She still hadn't made up her mind. What was stopping her from just going forward, embracing it? Was there anything in her old life that was worth going back to? She sat up against the side of the couch. The fact that she regularly had this thought, that it came so freely, worried her so much. Did everyone else have these thoughts? Was that the pact talking? And besides, didn't her old life have value? Could she really just let it go that easily? Could she really just... not be a human being anymore?

The familiar sound of fur flowing like water across wood and stone made her ears perk. She looked up at one of the workshop windows; a shape was just leaving it, making its way across the top of the shelves as it gained cohesion.

"Hi," Emilynn said, scooting over. Esmeralda hopped down onto the far end of the couch, walking over and sitting down next to the smaller familiar.

"Evening," the cat said, waiting for the mouse to gently lean against her before putting an arm around her shoulder. "Thought I'd pay a visit."

"Is it Penelope?" Emilynn asked, her voice barely a whisper.

"She received the last of the materials for the new potion today," Esmeralda replied. "She wants you to be there when she closes the shop tomorrow. So, a little before dinnertime."

"...Alone?" the mouse asked, confused.

"Easier that way," the cat answered. "If you're no longer the demon who made the pact, the contract is null and void. No need to have both parties present. But it's alright if you want Amanda to give you a lift, I'm sure Penelope has a plan in case that happens. She'll deal with it."

"I have... a day?" Emilyynn said shakily. Esmeralda gave her shoulder a squeeze.

"Make it count, little mouse," the cat said.

They spent a long moment sitting there silently, looking up at the starry ceiling.

"What if I don't go?" Emilyynn asked.

"She'll come find you, perhaps with Amanda's help," Esmeralda replied. "You probably don't want that to happen. You know how persuasive Penelope can be." The mouse nodded, shrinking in her seat. She knew firsthand. She'd signed that contract so quickly. "I'll try and slow her down," the cat continued, "but I doubt I can stop her when she gets like this. You can count on me for a lot of things, little mouse, but not this."

"You'd... you'd go against her?" Emilyynn said in disbelief. Helping her and Amanda get out of the shop, that had been a way to defuse the situation. This... this was open rebellion. From a familiar, no less. "But aren't you loyal to her?" The cat laughed with delight.

"I'm her pact mate, not her servant," Esmeralda replied, ruffling the mouse's hair. "My goodness, you're so precious. A pact is a contract, and a lenient one at that. It falls apart the moment it's no longer good for either party. Penelope's not my first witch, and I suspect she won't be my last. But I'm sticking around because her home is cozy and I get to learn on my own terms. She does a lot of research on slow days, you know."

"But..." Emilyynn said, her cheeks getting a little red, "I... I'd do anything for my witch. She... means the world to me."

"I think we both know where that's coming from," Esmeralda said with a sly smile.

"But, but..." the mouse continued, "I'd never lie to her, either! It's... overpowering."

"Ah, now that's a demon thing," the cat said. "Pact or not. Creatures of this world can speak against their hearts freely, but that's not how we work." She made a grand gesture. "We are beings of unbridled potential, bound by our word. At least, that's the simple version."

"What?" Emilyynn said, furrowing her brow. "No, I mean... it feels like I can't lie to Amanda. Specifically."

"Well go on then, try it," Esmeralda said with a toothy grin. "Prove me wrong. Lie to me."

"I... I don't want to," the mouse said, a little embarrassed.

"Of course you don't," the cat said, "that's how it works." The smaller familiar gave her a frustrated pout. "Haha, fine, fine, I'll make it easy for you," Esmeralda said. "I'll give you something to deny." She looked the demon mouse in the eye. "Does your heart beat for Penelope the way it does for Amanda?"

"What? No!" Emilyynn replied emphatically. Esmeralda leaned in closer.

"Does your heart beat for *me* the way it does for Amanda?" the cat asked with a grin.

"...!" the mouse replied. Or rather, tried to. Her eyes went wide as she opened her mouth again, struggling to make a sound, any sound come out. Why couldn't she say no? She wanted to, certainly.

Was it the truth, though?

She shrank further in her seat, looking up at Esmeralda, her face going beet red. The cat's grin widened and she pulled the mouse into a close hug.

"So precious," the larger familiar whispered in her smaller counterpart's ear. The embrace lasted for a while, neither of them wanting to end it.

Finally they pulled away, Emilyynn's blush enduring still, showing clearly despite the fur. She wasn't sure what to say. A tiny part of her was worried that this counted as betrayal, but that feeling was snuffed out immediately. There was certainly room enough in her life. It felt like there was in Esmeralda's, too. Maybe Amanda's, as well? Hopefully. Tomorrow felt so close, yet so far away. There was so much left to live in those few hours. So much to decide. She looked up at the demon cat, her heart racing. Esmeralda had always felt a little distant, but so full of wisdom despite her playfulness. And she'd been there for her, every step of the way.

The larger familiar returned her gaze. Emilyynn leaned in gently, eyes closed, lips trembling...

Esmeralda stopped her with a finger against her mouth, pushing her back gently. The mouse opened her eyes, then quickly looked down, flustered. The cat shook her head sweetly.

"You're just so ready to give your heart away, aren't you?" Esmeralda said. "Is that why you've been diving in so eagerly from the start?" She stood up on the couch, ruffling Emilyynn's hair one final time as she sat there in stunned embarrassment. She moved her hand down, gently placing a palm on the smaller familiar's chest, feeling her heart beat. "Be careful with it, little mouse. Not everyone will treat it with the gentleness it deserves."

And with that, the cat familiar left the workshop the way she came in, slipping through the crack in the far window. Emilyynn leaned back, processing the sudden rush of emotions, staring at the stars on the ceiling, letting Esmeralda's smell mingle with Amanda's.

One more day. She'd have to make the most of it.



The Bond

Emilynn fluttered into the store as Amanda opened the door, the demon mouse's tiny wings flapping as hard as they could. She landed on the counter, out of breath but triumphant. "Oh my gosh you made it!" the witch cheered as she entered, boxes in hand. "Two whole blocks! That's a new record, isn't it?"

"Yeah!" the mouse said as she sat down to recover. "Whew! I know it's mostly magic doing the work, but it's still really tiring, haha." Amanda grinned as she put the boxes up on the counter, gently scritching her familiar between the horns. Emilynn might not be able to lift boxes, but she could still lift spirits, and that counted.

"Where do you want these, love?" the import store owner asked as she walked in with the rest of the stuff. The only sign there was a person behind the pile of boxes were the two pointy tufts of fur from her cat ear headband poking out the top.

"Oh, over here!" Amanda said, directing her friend as she completed the delivery. "Thank you so much for doing this!"

"No worries," the fellow shopkeeper said, "it's a close enough walk. But if you really want to thank me," she added as she walked over to lean on the counter, "I could use a snack." She grinned at Emilynn, flashing her fangs. The mouse put her hands over her mouth in surprise.

"Zip, be nice to Em," Amanda said as she sorted through the boxes. This latest order from the store owner's specialty distributor had everything the witch needed to start the store; all that was needed now was to put in the time and the work.

"I will," her friend said, looking down at the demon mouse. "Besides, I do like to play with my food." She winked as one of the very realistic cat ears on her headband twitched.

Squeak! Emilynn hid behind her hands, completely flustered.

"Think I broke her," Zip said playfully as she looked back at Amanda. The witch walked up to the counter to retrieve her blushing familiar, picking her up and resuming the scritches.

"You play too hard," Amanda chided. "Anyway, it's all there! Everything made it over. Next time you drop by, the store's gonna be open. The council said they'll help get the word out, too, so hopefully the place is going to be packed!"

"Looking forward to that," her friend said as she headed for the door.

"Gosh, the next few days are gonna be something," the witch said as she walked her out. "You gonna be okay heading back?"

"Of course," Zip said as she left. "You know me. Cheers!"

"Bye!" Amanda said with a wave, closing the door and locking it. "Phew, what a day. We got so much done, Emilyynn!" She held her familiar up to her face; the mouse had seemingly recovered from the attention of the other shopkeeper. "C'mon, let's get dinner started."

"Y-yeah!" Emilyynn said, doing her best to smile as Amanda carried her upstairs. They'd made breakfast together, gotten a lot of progress done on getting the store ready, gone out to shop for the last things on the opening day checklist... and smiled throughout it all. Emilyynn had taken all her anxiety and fears and pushed them deep down, forbidding them from ruining this important occasion. She'd done it; she'd managed the herculean task of enjoying what might be their last day together. But now, time was almost up. And no matter what happened next, she needed to tell her witch something important. She needed to tell her the truth. "Hey, Amanda?" she said meekly.

"Hm?" the witch replied, stopping halfway up the steps. "What is it, Em?"

"It's... I..." the mouse began to say, struggling with words. "I, uh... n-nevermind." She looked down. How was she going to do this? There was so much to say. Where to begin? Her heart was already beating so fast.

"Aw, it's okay," Amanda said, resuming her climb. She'd gotten used to her familiar having trouble expressing herself sometimes, but unbeknownst to her, this was different. Still, the fact that she didn't make a big deal of these moments meant a lot to Emilyynn.

The witch gently put the demon mouse down on the counter as she planned out what to cook. Penelope was closing up shop right now; who could tell how long she'd be willing to wait before taking the matter into her own hands. Emilyynn worked out what to say in her head. She could do this. She stood up on the counter.

"Amanda, I..." she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Her hands were shaking; this was so hard. Her witch sifted through the pantry; she hadn't heard her. "I... I'm..." Emilyynn repeated, a little louder this time.

"Hm?" Amanda said, turning around. Her familiar opened her mouth to speak, only to be interrupted by the sound of the witch's phone. "Oh, sorry, hold on," she said, picking it up off the counter. "Yes, hello!" Emilyynn held her breath. Could it be— "Hey Penelope, what's up?" The demon mouse's blood ran cold. "Can it wait? We're getting dinner started," Amanda said as she leaned against the fridge. Her familiar raised a trembling hand, trying to get her witch's attention, but she didn't notice; instead, she rolled her eyes as she switched the phone to her other hand. "Yes, I'm sitting down," she lied. "What is it?"

Then her phone vanished from her hand.

Emilyynn landed on top of the fridge with a *poof*, struggling to hold on to the smartphone; she quickly put it down, mashing the 'end call'

button with the tip of her tail. She wasn't going to let this happen. She wasn't going to get interrupted before being able to tell Amanda the truth. She deserved to hear it from her, at the very least.

"What? Emilyynn!" the witch said, turning around. "Why'd you do that? I was talking!"

The phone rang again; the familiar mashed the red button again, frantically running her hands along the side until she could switch the phone to vibrate. It buzzed loudly against the top of the fridge as Penelope called again.

"I have to tell you something!" Emilyynn said, tears welling up in her eyes. "It's important! Please!" Amanda looked up, concerned.

"Okay Em," she said, taking a deep breath. "I can call Penelope back. What is it?" The mouse demon walked up to the edge of the fridge, trying to ignore the constant buzzing of the phone behind her. She took a deep breath as well. This was it.

"...!"

But no words came out.

Emilyynn stepped back, her eyes going wide. No. No! She was ready, she wanted to tell her everything! This wasn't a lie; why couldn't she get the words out? Amanda's look of concern deepened.

"Everything okay?" she asked, stepping closer. "We don't have to do this now if it's hard, we have time." She put her hands up on the edge of the fridge.

"No we don't!" Emilyynn shouted, her entire body shaking. She needed to be the one to tell her, the one to let her know—

Her breath caught in her throat. She couldn't let Amanda know. She'd given her word. She'd signed a contract. 'Article one: you cannot let anyone know about any of this.' Esmeralda and Leslie knew already; talking with them was fine. But Amanda had no idea. She was off-limits.

"No," Emilyynn said, collapsing to her knees. "No, no! I... I need to tell you this! ...!" But she couldn't. The demon part of her was strong enough to make her word her bond. And the human part of her, as faint and distant as it was by now, had signed that contract. Even if it was with a name the familiar couldn't remember, it still counted; it was still... attached...

Emilyynn froze. This transitive state she was in kept her shackled, but there was a way. The only way. If it was no longer her name on the contract, it'd be null and void. She still had a choice: go back in silence, or go forward with the truth. She had to pick a person to become.

What if she went back to Penelope's lab, let her undo all this, left everything behind? She'd get a fresh start. A chance to try something different, maybe go back and actually finish something she'd started. Maybe find Amanda again. But they'd be starting from square one, with so many things she couldn't say. It would hurt so much. Maybe it'd be

best to leave it all behind. But she'd still be confronted with the face of someone else in the mirror. Someone she didn't like. Someone whose only legacy was a series of failed projects because it was so hard to root for the success of someone you didn't want to think about at all. Still... maybe she could do something about that now. She still had a friend or two, family that hadn't had an update in a while. People to go back to.

But what if she committed to the path she was on, and gave all that up? Give up on being human? For the first time in her life, she loved who she'd become. But that came with a pact, a companionship; what if Amanda no longer wanted her after knowing the truth? The most terrifying knot of anxiety she'd ever felt pulled her heart in on itself. Could she live with that? Would she find someone else she loved as much? Would she ever find a connection this meaningful? Maybe. Maybe not. But she could try. She wanted herself to find happiness and fulfillment now, and she'd search for it, in this world or another. She owed herself that much.

She lowered her head and closed her eyes, reaching deep within herself. There was still a shell around her old self, cracked and leaking, slowly filling with the essence of the form she'd been lent by Penelope's potion. She reached out to touch the remaining walls around her, and braced herself. She would never get another chance to be who she was.

She summoned every last bit of energy she had, and pushed the walls apart. The outside world of her inside self came flooding in; she gave herself to the rushing current, letting it subsume her.

Emilynn opened her eyes, her entire world glowing, her whole body filled with energy desperately looking for a way out. She looked at Amanda, now concerned beyond belief, her hand reaching for the phone still buzzing against the top of the fridge. The familiar gasped loudly, tears streaming down her face. There was a tremendous feeling of loss, a gaping hole slowly being filled back in by the exhilaration of potential futures. She was no longer the person who'd signed the contract. She was free.

"I'm..." the demon mouse struggled to say. "I wasn't..." She took a ragged breath. "I wasn't always a demon! I never saw the otherworld. I was born here... human... I... I changed... just before we met." She slumped down, panting, unable to look away from Amanda's look of...

Relief? Pity?

"I... had a feeling," the witch said, taking a step back. Emilynn was at a loss.

"You... you knew?" the familiar said between breaths. "H-how?"

"Well," Amanda said as she looked to the side, "you picked things up really fast. I didn't have to teach you about any human-type stuff. And... you knew how to read." Emilynn's eyes went wide. The look Amanda had given her in Leslie's favorite coffee shop made so much sense now.

Of course demons wouldn't be able to read fresh out of the otherworld. Penelope must have thought it'd never come up.

"I'm... I'm sorry," Emilyynn said, her heart nearly beating out of her chest.

"I mean, it's okay, really," Amanda replied, looking back at her familiar. "I figured there was something, but I didn't want to pry. And it's rare, but I guess demonic corruption still happens, so... we're lucky to have found each other, right?" She smiled weakly. Emilyynn looked at her, at a loss for words. There was more. There was so much more, and it would break her heart, but she was rapidly losing her ability to speak. Or think, for that matter. "You don't need to be sad, Em," Amanda said as she stepped closer. "It's okay."

"It... it wasn't luck," Emilyynn whispered, shaking her head. She needed to tell the whole truth; she couldn't live with a misunderstood confession hanging over her head. Her witch had to know, or she'd never truly be free. "It was... it was a job."

Amanda blinked, her worry replaced by confusion. "A job?" she asked. "That doesn't make any sense, I summoned you! How was it a job?" She took a step forward, bringing her head close to her collapsed familiar. "Who would even—"

The phone buzzed again, shaking the fridge slightly with every vibration.

Amanda took a step back. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out.

Emilyynn tried to look away, but could barely move her head. Now she knew.

"She was there from the start," the witch said with dawning comprehension. "She had the room at the Summoning Circle prepped before I got there. She kept asking about you, pestering me about my basics, trying to convince me to—" The phone started buzzing again. Amanda looked at it, then took a deep breath. She picked it up; there was nothing Emilyynn could do to stop her at this point; she could barely move. And even if she could, she was so overwhelmed with guilt that she wouldn't know what to do. She had kept this hidden for so long; would her witch ever forgive her?

"Penelope?" Amanda said as she answered. "Yeah, listen, you got me—I wasn't sitting down. I was cooking, and I dropped my phone. I think it's okay now. What did you want to tell me?" The witch looked at her familiar, getting visibly distraught by how upset the demon mouse was. She steeled herself. "Penny, listen—" She gritted her teeth, waiting for an opportunity to get a word in again. "Penny. We spent all day working. I dragged Emilyynn halfway across the witches quarter, she's so tuckered out that she's already asleep." The voice on the other line continued, but Amanda cut her off. "I just wanna sit down with some

mac & cheese and watch shows until I pass out. Can this wait? I'm not getting dressed and going back out again."

There was a long pause. Then the voice spoke again. Emilyynn would probably be able to tell what it said were it any other day, but the ringing in her ears had gotten too loud right now.

"Sure," Amanda replied. "At dawn, before you open. That's fine. Yeah, of course I'll bring her. Thank you. I'm gonna go eat now. You too. Bye!" She ended the call, turned off the phone entirely, then breathed out loudly as she leaned on the kitchen counter. "Okay. Now we have time." She stayed there for a moment, turning the phone over in her hand. Finally, she put it down and turned her attention back to Emilyynn. "She really wanted to see you tonight. But it wasn't about sudden test results, right? Em, what did she actually want?"

"I'm... out of time," the familiar said, her head spinning. "She wants to turn me back, but..." Emilyynn broke down sobbing, smiling despite the tears. "She's too late."

"Em," Amanda said as she walked back toward the fridge, her face wracked with concern, "what do you mean? What did you do?"

"Something... reckless," her familiar struggled to say, propping herself up and reaching out with a limp hand with the last of her strength. She wouldn't be able to hold on much longer; her whole body felt like it was made of fire.

"Why??" the worried witch said, reaching back.

"Because... this is the life I want," Emilyynn said, choking back tears as the world faded around her, "because I love you." She slumped forward as it all went to black, falling off the fridge into Amanda's arms as the witch rushed to catch her.

By Any Other Name

Emilynn was lost in a world of pure light. Her witch was there, right there; she could feel her presence, just out of reach. If only she could take her hand. She stretched her hand as far as it would go; both hands, muscles pulling, fire rippling across her skin, but it wasn't enough. She stood up as high as she could, on the tips of her toes, her entire body tingling with electricity, but it wasn't enough. Every other part of her joined in, everything pushing and pulling and expending every last bit of energy to close that gap between her and her witch. She'd gone so far, sacrificed so much; it wouldn't be in vain. It couldn't. She refused to accept it.

And then, she felt it; the tip of her fingers brushing against hers. She grabbed one hand, then another, and then pulled her in and held on with all her strength. She would never let go again, no matter what. She'd—

GASP!

Emilynn opened her eyes. It was dark out, the nightstand lamp giving the room a comforting glow. She was back in bed, face down, lying on top of a concerned but relieved Amanda. She had her arms around her witch, holding on tight.

"Amanda," the familiar said, slowly reconnecting with reality. "What..." her eyes went wide. She looked down.

She had her arms around her witch.

She pulled them back, looking up, then down, then up again. She was almost as tall as Amanda.

"Aah!" she yelled, pushing herself up in a mild panic. Her wings unfurled to their full length, throwing the covers clean off the bed. "AAH!" she shouted, looking at the long leathery limbs her tiny little shoulder additions had grown into.

"It's okay!" Amanda said reassuringly, gently pulling Emilynn back down to her. "I've got you, it's okay. Your body just needs a little time to adjust to a lot of new things." The familiar let her witch draw her into a close embrace. She reached up to feel her head, her hair, her horns, her ears, gave her tail a tentative twitch... she was still herself. Just... taller. Smoother. And she was close to Amanda and she would never let her go and nothing else in the world would ever matter as much as this again. She hugged back, head tucked under the witch's chin, tears running down her cheeks.

"It's okay," Amanda repeated, gently stroking Emilynn's hair. The mouse girl relaxed, slowly but surely, her outstretched wings drifting

down to drape themselves over herself and her witch. But as much as she tried to calm down, there were still questions left unanswered, and the growing silence—no matter how comfortable it was—just tightened the knot in her stomach even further. She had to say something.

"It stopped being a job the moment you took me home," she said softly.

"Shh," Amanda replied, tightening her hug a little. "I told you, it's okay."

"You have these big dreams, these big plans," Emilynn continued, her voice trembling, "and I want to help you make them come true. You're doing so many things I could never do. I could never finish anything. But you just... you don't give up. And I don't want to give up either."

Amanda gently pet her familiar's head, remaining silent. Emilynn couldn't see her face from where she was, and her heart was still a jumbled mess. She didn't know if her witch was mad, or happy, or anywhere in-between.

"I didn't know what I was getting into," the mouse girl continued, "but I'm glad I did, because... I found who I was, who I wanted to be. And I want to keep being that person with you. And if you don't want me to stay, it's okay, I understand, I..." She sniffled, trying to find the words. "I'll still be me. And I'm glad I got to be myself with you, at least for a little—"

"Shh," Amanda repeated. She released her hug slightly, giving Emilynn enough room to lift herself up a little and look at her. The witch had been silently crying. "I love you too," she said with a smile.

They kissed.

It was a little bit awkward; they had been through a lot in a short amount of time, and they both lacked experience. But as always, they made it work.

And then Emilynn broke down sobbing again, and that made Amanda cry even more, and they just lied there holding each other tight for a while.

A long while.

"I don't want to go back," the mouse girl said, eventually.

"I think we need to," Amanda said, "at least to clear things up. And let her know what's what."

"I don't want her to turn me back," Emilynn said. "Even... even if I don't think she can."

"Either way, I'm not going to let her," the witch replied. "I have a familiar now, and she's the best." She tightened her hug a little bit.

"She's probably going to be mad," the familiar added.

"Penelope..." Amanda began, then trailed off, shaking her head a little. "My sister's really good at making potions that turn you into who you want to be."

Emilynn blinked. She lifted her head, looking her witch in the eye.

Amanda smiled. "I always wanted to be a witch, but I just couldn't see myself ever making it that far. Because, well... I couldn't see myself for who I was. So I escaped into art, and it helped me forget about it for a long while. And got very good at it. Before I knew it, I had a residency waiting for me, in a gallery very far away from home. Very far away from witches." She took a deep breath. "I was packed up and ready to go. But right at the last moment, I hesitated. My sister had just opened up her shop. This was my last chance. What if, just for a moment, she could show me a part of myself I'd been running away from all this time? Turns out she could. And once I saw the real me, in person... I couldn't let her go. So I dropped everything, embraced who I was, and poured myself into magical study. I became the witch I wanted to be. Penelope was there for me; she helped me plan everything out, and I stuck with it."

Emilynn stared at Amanda with disbelief. "That's... that's the crisis you talked about?" she asked softly.

"With Leslie? Yeah," her witch replied. "I didn't know you were paying attention to our talk back there, haha." Then she blinked a few times. "Wait," she added. "They were talking about you."

Emilynn nodded sheepishly. "This... this was also sort of a last chance for me."

Amanda shook her head, smiling. "Gosh, look at us, huh? No wonder we ended up together." She gave her familiar a long look, as if something finally clicked. "Just two more of Penelope's projects."

"Her... projects?" Emilynn repeated, not sure if she fully understood the extent of what Amanda meant.

"Penelope doesn't like leaving anything to chance. And she really doesn't like when things don't go exactly the way she planned." The witch took on a growing look of determination. "But some projects get out of hand, and at some point they're no longer yours... and you have to let them go. I think she needs to understand that."

The mouse girl nodded. She didn't know what to say.

Amanda took a deep breath. "I think this all makes a lot more sense now. It's going to be fine; my sister and I are just going to have a little talk. We still have fights, but we learn from them. We grow."

Amanda gently shifted her weight, leading Emilynn onto her side. She reached over and pulled the covers back onto the bed, draping an arm over her familiar in the process. "You sure grew a lot in a short amount of time, huh?" she said with a smile. "It's not always easy, but... it's important. And it's been so inspiring to watch you be so willing to dive into doing the important things, time after time." She gently stroked her hair. "It must have been a lot."

Emilynn smiled back, snuggling up to her witch. She was so warm,

and so close; being with her this way, in a form that was almost her equal in size, brought up emotions she'd long since given up on ever feeling. "Yeah, it's..." she said, finding it harder and harder to get the words out. "It's all been so much. But... I'm here, and... you're here. So, I... I'll be okay."

Amanda kissed her softly on the forehead. "Let's get some rest," the witch said. "Tomorrow's a big day."

Squeak. Emilyynn covered her mouth, her face turning red. Amanda gently stroked her familiar's hair.

"It's going to be fine," the witch said with a smile. "We can make it work."

Letting Go

Emilynn held Amanda's hand tightly as the two of them walked up to Penny Pots' front door. The familiar spotted her reflection in the glass; her witch had lent her an old dress that, while a bit big for her, left her wings and tail unrestricted. It was also really cute. She adjusted the bright pink ribbon wrapped around her neck in a bow, desperate for something to do with her free hand. She'd gotten used to the demonic aspects of herself by now, but... seeing the rest of her, close enough to human for her brain to make that connection, hit her so hard. That was her reflection. All of it.

She was finally free to be herself.

So much time spent wondering what felt off, so much rationalizing, so many misconceptions. But deep down, this is what she'd wanted. Well, maybe not the horns, or the big mouse ears, or the other very visible proofs of her demonic nature... but even they felt natural now. Maybe this is how having a new true name felt. She was Emilynn; sometimes a mouse, always a demon. Always a girl.

She smiled despite herself, albeit nervously.

"Hey," Amanda said with a smile, gently squeezing Emilynn's bare shoulder. "You look great."

"Thanks," the familiar replied, her face going red. She took a couple of deep breaths. "Okay. I'm ready."

"Okay," the witch said, knocking on the door. It unlocked by itself.

Amanda led the way into the potion shop, Emilynn holding onto her arm tightly, pressing her cheek against her witch's shoulder. They made their way forward, walking through the maze-like arrangement of shelves and displays until they could come into view of the counter.

Penelope didn't flinch as she made eye contact with her sister, then her familiar, and back to her sister. Her face was a mask of stern resolve. She reached under the counter, pulling up a bottle of amber liquid. Emilynn immediately shrank back, hiding behind her witch.

The alchemist unscrewed the cap and poured herself a shot, downing it in one go. She coughed, then poured herself another for later. The mouse girl breathed a shaky sigh of relief.

"So," Penelope said, stowing the whiskey bottle. "That's it, then."

"Yeah," Emilynn said, not letting go of her witch.

"Yeah," Amanda added.

"You told her," the older sister said.

"Yeah," Emilynn said, nodding. "Before, after... everything. We... we had a lot in common, turns out." Penelope sighed, then shook her head.



"And here I thought demons were supposed to honor their contracts," the alchemist said.

"That's..." Emilyynn meekly began to say, taking a moment to find the words, "that's not my name on there anymore." The older witch snorted.

"Look at you," Penelope said as she lifted her glass, "already figuring out clever little technicalities. Did Esmeralda teach you that?" She drank. The mouse girl looked away.

The alchemist reached over to a small filing cabinet, sliding a drawer open and rifling through it. The witch and her familiar approached the counter slowly. Penelope pulled out a stapled document and slid it over, leaning back in her chair. "Here," she said.

"What is it?" Amanda asked, looking at the forms.

"Identity transfer request," Penelope said. "City doesn't like it when people vanish. Just fill out your part, bring it back, I'll fill in mine, and then you can go get your stuff, close your accounts, however you want to work that out. Your bills are paid. You're free. The rest is up to you."

"My bills..." Emilyynn said, dumbfounded. "But... I broke the contract."

"Yeah well I keep my promises," Penelope said, perhaps a little bit too quickly, as she bent forward. The familiar buried her face in her witch's shoulder, turning away. The alchemist sighed and looked to the side, leaning back in her chair again.

"Thank you," Emilyynn said softly.

"Yeah Penny," Amanda said as she stroked her familiar's hair reassuringly. "We appreciate it. And, like..." the witch sighed, frowning. "Why are you being like this? You had a big secret plan and it didn't work out. So what? Em and I are happy. We're doing amazing things together. What's the problem? You're acting like it's the end of the world."

"It is for me!" Penelope shouted, slamming her fist on the counter. Amanda and Emilyynn both took a step back, stunned. "You were stuck in a loop and nothing else was working. I was going to get you out of it and then life would've kept on going. Sure, you both got what you wanted, fine!" She stood up, her face growing somber. "I turned a human being into a demon. Permanently. That's on me. As soon as the council hears that I let demonic—that I MADE demonic corruption happen? I'm done. Penny Pots is done, all this is gone. It's over. It is, actually, the end of the world for me. Armageddon." She slumped back into her seat, looking off into the distance with a thousand-yard stare. "I'll lose my house."

"It... it was an accident!" Emilyynn said, stepping forward, her hand still holding on to Amanda's tightly. "I didn't follow your instructions. You were trying something, and it didn't work, and I knew the risks, and I kept going because, because... That's what I wanted. This isn't your fault. I'll... I'll sign things, whatever it takes. Please!"

Penelope looked the familiar in the eye for a long moment. "You think a bunch of elder witches are going to listen to you?" she said.

"I'll make them listen," Amanda said, stepping forward as well.

Penelope shook her head. She looked at Emilyynn again.

"You could've just told me you were a girl," the alchemist said. "I have potions for that. Would've saved us all a lot of trouble."

The mouse girl looked down. "Well, I..." she replied, searching for the right words, "I didn't know."

"I should've brought it up earlier," Penelope said, defeated.

Amanda turned to her familiar, gently clasping her shoulders.

"Em, I think Penelope and I need to talk for a bit," the younger sister said. "Can you stay here?" Her familiar nodded. Amanda smiled. "It's gonna be okay," she said. They kissed. The witch turned around and led her older sister into the back office, leaving the mouse girl alone for a little while. Well, maybe not alone.

Emilyynn walked back to Esmeralda's favorite spot, but it was empty. She thought for a moment, then sat down on the cat's favorite cushion. That usually brought her out of wherever she was hiding.

"Look at you," the cat familiar said, peeking up from around the corner as the mouse girl jumped with a start. Had she gotten better at sneaking up on Emilyynn, or had she been going easy on her before? The mouse familiar shuffled a little to the side to leave some room. She'd gotten big, but she was still a lot smaller than before all of this had happened. Esmeralda hopped up, shifting into her small humanoid form and sitting down next to Emilyynn in one fluid motion.

The mouse girl looked down expectantly.

"Hm?" Esmeralda said, looking up.

"Aren't you, uh..." Emilyynn said, a little confused, "going to change?"

"I did," the cat familiar said.

"Oh," the mouse familiar said with dawning comprehension. "I thought, uh... I thought you could do this too. You know, considering—"

"Penelope never really connected with me as deeply as you and your witch did," Esmeralda said. "Nor did anyone else before her. This is all you. Impressive, considering. But then yours is an unusual situation. Maybe it gave you a head start."

Emilyynn looked down, a little uncomfortable.

"What?" the cat asked.

"It, uh... it doesn't seem fair to be the tall one," the mouse replied. "How do you, uh... change back again?"

Esmeralda laughed. "You're just so adorable," she said. "It's simple. Your body remembers, the rest is instinct. Just close your eyes and picture the shape you want to go back to. Slip into it like a pair of socks."

Emilyynn closed her eyes. She pictured her second form, went back to the moments when she first woke up in it; how it felt, how she—"Aah?" she said out loud, feeling herself shrinking, her body folding back in on itself; it sort of tickled? Before she could say something about her

dress getting looser, the entire process accelerated beyond her ability to control it. "AAH!" she yelled as her entire being compressed back into she shape she'd visualized, letting loose a cloud of dark blue smoke around her that billowed out of her rapidly-collapsing dress.

"Oh wow," she said as she sat up out of the pile of fabric, now shorter than Esmeralda again. The cat scooped over.

"Like a natural," the larger familiar said.

"Haha, uh... Thanks," the mouse familiar said, leaning against Esmeralda's shoulder; the cat put an arm around her, a little routine they were both comfortable with now. "Thanks for teaching me all this."

"Of course," Esmeralda said. "I'm going to have to teach you a lot more now, too. There's much you need to catch up on, and the witches quarter doesn't exactly have a demon school. But you're a fast learner, so I think it'll work out." She grinned earnestly. "Ahh, this is so exciting. I get to have a student! I haven't had one in so long."

Emilynn gave a little laugh. "Thanks," she said. "I... I'm still surprised I went through with it... Like, this far. But... I'm happy. This feels good." She turned to the cat familiar with a sheepish little smile. "This feels really good." Esmeralda met her gaze.

"And this?" the cat asked with a smile, leaning in closer.

Emilynn gasped. They kissed.

The cat leaned back with the biggest grin as the mouse sat there, flustered and beet-red.

"But... b-but," the smaller familiar sputtered, "I thought you... you didn't want to..."

"Oh I wanted to," Esmeralda said playfully, "I just didn't want to be the *first*. You're the hopeless romantic type, it wouldn't have been proper. Besides, you had so much to deal with at the time. For you, I could be patient."

"Oh," Emilynn said. "Really?"

"Don't be so surprised," Esmeralda said with a smile. "You're thrust into a new world and instead of being frightened, you rush into everything with eager gusto and wide-eyed wonder. It's so refreshing to see someone embrace the unknown with that much enthusiasm." She ruffled the mouse familiar's hair affectionately. "You really ought to know just how charming you are."

Emilynn's heart raced. Was that really what she did? She felt so paralyzed by anxiety and doubt all the time, but... maybe she wasn't giving herself enough credit. Maybe she really did like to dive into things despite her fears. Maybe...

She reached up and gently took Esmeralda's hand, moving it a little bit so her fingers were between the smaller familiar's horns.

"Ahh, I see," the cat said with a grin, gently scritching in that spot. The mouse melted against her, sighing happily.

Opening Day

"Hi, welcome to Mandymanancy!" Emilyynn said with the biggest smile as another customer entered. The latter almost got her pointy hat caught in the celebratory ribbons hung around the freshly-decorated store, but the purple-skinned demon at her side carefully reached up and lifted the slivers of fabric, letting her pass undisturbed.

"Ah, this is the place," the witch said, eyes glued to her smartphone. She made a beeline for the portable charms display. The demon began to follow her, but stopped mid-stride.

"Oh. Hello again," she said to Emilyynn with a smile. The mouse girl's eyes widened in recollection.

"H-hi," the smaller familiar replied with a smile, her face going red.

It had taken a lot of time and energy and hard work, but this more than made up for it. A lot of the neighborhood had showed up to browse over the course of the day, and almost half of them weren't witches. Amanda's goal of making things that even mundane folks would like was paying off. Emilyynn was tending the store, running the cash machine, and giving demonstrations of the hair color comb to curious customers (her own hair was currently bright blue; her favorite). Throughout all this, she kept an eye out the front display windows, waiting for her witch to return. She'd stepped out to go to a council meeting with Penelope, but it had been a while and the familiar was getting a tiny bit worried. Just a few more minutes and she'd be closing up.

"OH MY GOSH, EM!" Leslie said as they entered the store.

"Leslie! Hi!" Emilyynn replied with a big grin, giving her mouse ears a playful twitch. Her friend practically ran up to the counter.

"You look amazing?" they said, making a sweeping hand gesture. "The bow is adorable. And that outfit is so snappy! Is that the store uniform?"

"Haha, no, it's just for today!" Emilyynn said. "I felt like dressing up and Amanda's been letting me go through her wardrobe a bit. Oh, oh! Look!" She stepped away from the counter and spun in place, the long skirt fanning out as she twirled.

"Just adorable," Leslie said, shaking their head. "I'm glad I caught you before closing time! Plants are gonna take a little longer, but I have a friend who's going to help me bring them over. You still sure about the rest of the stuff?"

"Yeah," Emilyynn said. "I kinda don't need any of it now. Besides, I already got my phone and things, I'll be okay. I, uh... ah, sorry!" She quickly darted back behind the counter to attend to the day's

last customer. As the latter's attention was still wholly focused on her smartphone, her familiar handled the transaction with a courteous smile.

"Thank you so much! I hope you like it!" Emilyynn said cheerfully as the pair left. No sooner was the store empty than she took a deep breath. "I'm gonna have to post that update at some point," she said to her green-haired friend.

Leslie put a hand on her shoulder. "Hey," they said, "when you do, you're gonna have some good pictures to go with it."

Emilyynn grinned, then her eyes went wide. "Penelope!" she said as the alchemist walked into the store. "Is it over? How'd it go?"

"It's fine, just... Amanda's better at explaining," the alchemist replied as she gave the shop a once-over. She nodded approvingly. Her gaze then focused on Leslie, who was leaning on the counter. "Oh, you're working here now?"

"Uh, no no! I'm just visiting!" Leslie said with wide eyes and wider hand gestures. "I'm still good to help you out during the festival, I swear!"

The alchemist turned to Emilyynn. "Amanda's gonna be here soon. It's gotta be closing time, right? I'll let you lock up, we'll wait outside." She flipped the store's 'open' sign to 'closed' and stepped outside, closely followed by Leslie.

Emilyynn wasted no time in closing up, stepping outside and locking the door just as her witch walked up to the group gathering outside. "Amanda!" she shouted as she ran to her and leapt into her arms. "How'd the meeting go?"

"Oof, haha!" the younger witch said, returning the hug. "Good news!"

"Well, mediocre news," the older witch corrected, tugging at the choker around her neck.

"Listen," Amanda said, "I can make it clear how important the service you provide for the community is AND I can say how mean it was to lie to me this whole time. They both stand, and the council has to see that one is way more important than the other."

"Has to?" Emilyynn asked, stepping back. "They're not done?"

"Well, not yet," Amanda said, "they have a few more details to work out, but most of it is settled. Penelope's still in good standing. They're gonna figure out how to make sure this doesn't happen again—well, not accidentally, at least—and Penny Pots is gonna be okay."

"That is good news!" Leslie said.

"Yeah, yeah," Penelope said, unconvinced. "They can still hit me with sanctions, saddle me with an overseer, give me tons of paperwork I don't need. Listen, I—" The gem attached to the choker glowed. "—I don't always know what I'm doing." The witch grimaced. "Dang it, I hate this thing! They're just messing with me. Bet they're having a big laugh about it."

"Well, better that they're having fun with all this," Amanda said. "Besides, they sounded really happy about Emilynn." The mouse girl blinked.

"Me?" she asked. "Did you tell them about me?"

"They came by earlier today," Amanda said. "Didn't you notice them? A group of older witches, some in robes, some in fancy suits..."

Emilynn's eyes widened. "Oh! Oh them! I didn't... I didn't realize," the mouse girl said, thinking back to the eccentric group. They'd been very nice, and extremely stylish, and... "So that's why they asked me so many questions," Emilynn added. "They... they liked me?"

"They love you," Penelope said with resignation. "They're very happy you're happy."

"See? It's going to be okay!" Amanda said, ruffling her familiar's hair. "Like Esmeralda says, it's not the end of the world." The mouse girl's ears perked up.

"How is Esmeralda?" she asked, looking up at Penelope.

"She's fine," the older sister said, "she's getting ready. I called the place across the street, they have a tiny spot all set up."

"Oh that's right!" Amanda said with a wide grin. "You have a date!" Emilynn's face instantly went red. She tried to say something back, but couldn't find the words. Her witch just grinned wider.

Leslie looked at Amanda, then Emilynn. "Wait, Esmeralda too?" they asked.

Amanda ruffled her familiar's hair. "Em's popular," she said proudly. Emilynn could only reply with a tiny *squeak*.

"Gosh, your sister AND your familiar!" Leslie said to Penelope with a laugh. "Does that make you feel left out?"

Penelope looked back at Leslie, her face an emotionless mask.

The group went quiet.

The alchemist glanced at Emilynn and, after a moment, raised her hands with a slight smile. "Listen," she answered, "y'all go have fun with who you want. I'm already in a committed relationship: with a building that has my name on it. I'm good."

Leslie let out the breath they'd been holding in and laughed awkwardly. "I mean, it's a pretty good building," they added as they scratched the back of their head.

"Yeah, haha!" Amanda added, patting Leslie on the shoulder. She took a few steps toward the store, looking over the window displays.

Her familiar followed along, staying close.

"Looks like you did a good job closing up, Em!" Amanda said, to the mouse girl's delight. "Sorry for running out on you like that, on opening day of all times. But the council kind of shuffled things around to have an early meeting about this whole thing and I wanted to be there for Penelope."

Emilynn nodded, taking Amanda's hand and squeezing it.

"We finally did it, Em," the witch said, her eyes practically sparkling. "Mandymanancy is a store, and it's open, and people came by to shop there. Gosh, I can't believe how long I've been waiting for this day to get here."

Squeak. Emilynn's heart was beating fast again. It had been Amanda's dream at first, but now she wholeheartedly shared it. As far as goals went, bringing magic to more people was a good one, she felt. Magic had certainly changed her life, after all.

Amanda wrapped her arms around her familiar. "I know it has my name on it, but it's our store now," she said. "It's not in the best spot, and the stock is hard to produce at times, but... we'll work it out."

They both grinned. And kissed.

"I can't wait to hear about how things went today after I left," Amanda said, "but I have a feeling there's someone else you'd also like to see today."

Emilynn smiled sheepishly.

"Go have fun," Amanda said, giving her familiar a big hug and another quick kiss.

Squeak!

Emilynn took a few steps down the street, unfurling her wings to their full size; a few strong flaps and a healthy dose of magic later, she had taken off. She gained enough height to clear the neighboring buildings, then made a beeline for Penny Pots. The city looked so different from above; alive, both with people, and with little colorful spots of magic in a hundred and one different forms. She looked forward to getting acquainted with more of them.

After all, her heart was so very full, and there was so much of it to give.

Fin.

