

**I PROMISED EVERYONE SOME
SUBSTITUTE FAMILIAR
SHORT STORIES
BUT BEFORE I KNEW IT
I'D WRITTEN
A WHOLE BOOK?**

1.5



BY ALEX ZANDRA VAN CHESTEIN

Spoiler alert!
Read the book that started it all!
(Well, this series at least.)



Hey hi hello! You're about to read a collection of short stories that act as a sequel-prequel-companion to the Substitute Familiar light novel series. Specifically, the first book! You don't need to have read it to enjoy *A Drink To Amanda*, *Penelope And the Council*, or the 23 other stories in this light novel, but it'll make the experience much better (and save you from a bunch of spoilers). I recommend catching up on SubFami #1 before reading any further! (That said, you're the boss!)

You can find everything over at **books.zandravandra.com**.

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

—Alex Zandra

@zandravandra

A Drink To Amanda

Copyright © 2018 Alex Zandra Van Chestein

Written and illustrated by **Alex Zandra Van Chestein**

Edited by **Robin Billadeau**

Additional story help by Aura Triolo & Amber Wolfer

Penelope And The Council

Copyright © 2019 Alex Zandra Van Chestein

Written and illustrated by **Alex Zandra Van Chestein**

Edited by **Laura Ronemus**

Consulting & dialogue help by **Kortney Terry** & **Jade @Gaydarade**

Additional story help by Aura Triolo & Amber Wolfer

Additional editing help by Robin Billadeaux

...and 23 other stories

Copyright © 2019 Alex Zandra Van Chestein

Written and illustrated by **Alex Zandra Van Chestein**

Edited by **Laura Ronemus**

Consulting & dialogue help by **Kortney Terry**

Additional story help by Aura Triolo & Amber Wolfer

All rights reserved. Please don't copy or distribute this book.

Contents

A Drink To Amanda	5
Penelope And The Council	25
Tutor	69
Demand I	71
Service	71
Demand II	72
Famous	74
Vending I	75
Circle	76
Council I	78
Home I	80
Council II	81
Trailblazers I	82
Home II	83
Trailblazers II	84
Vending II	86
Home III	87
Council III	88
Apprentice	90
Home IV	91
Naptime	92
Trailblazers III	93
Home V	93
Demand III	94
Vending III	95

A DRINK TO AMANDA

A SUBSTITUTE FAMILIAR SHORT STORY



BY ALEX ZANDRA VAN CHESTEIN

1

The bell over the entrance jingled merrily as he entered the store. The place was equal parts brand-new and lived-in: a haphazard jumble of hand-me-down furniture crammed into every nook and cranny of a newly-renovated building, ready to receive the layer of dust that would make it all feel authentic. Bottles and books lined the shelves, most of them lacking any sort of labeling or identification. Even the dangerous-looking ones. Especially the dangerous-looking ones.

He quickly rolled his suitcase inside before the door closed behind him.

"Penny?" he called out quietly. He left the suitcase up front and started searching. The room to the right had probably been another shop entirely; someone had gone open-concept on the whole place and torn down the wall between them. This area was blessedly less cramped, with shelves relegated to the walls and a couple of mismatched tables given center stage. Still no sign of another living soul, though. Well, save for the black cat who darted out of sight immediately when the visitor put his backpack down on the chair it was resting under. "Sorry," he muttered under his breath, continuing his search.

Back in the main room, he finally noticed the counter; at least, what he assumed was the counter. Without proper signage or till it was hard to tell it apart from all the other chest-high surfaces around the place. What *had* this place been before Penelope turned it into a shop? A diner? Some sort of bar? The past few months had been busy for her, no doubt.

For him, too.

He and Penelope had kept in touch somewhat while he was overseas for the summer. He'd been touring galleries, meeting curators, getting interviews... yet he still didn't feel like a proper artist. Suddenly it seemed like everyone was enthralled with his new work, with the direction he'd embarked on with no particular expectations. Maybe it just hadn't hit him yet. He was used to nobody giving his work a second glance. Maybe all he needed was some more time. Tomorrow he'd be set up in his new place, his residency would begin and surely everything would start making sense. Besides, wasn't this his dream life?

Well. A dream life.

His gaze wandered over the merchandise. The shelves next to the counter were the only ones which seemed like they'd received some love; everything on them was organized and labeled, albeit messily—and, from the looks of it, by hand. Books on alchemy, general magical publications, purified water...ah ha! Featured potions. His eyes lit up.

He browsed the potion selection. Penelope had talked a bit about the work she'd done preparing for tomorrow's grand opening, but had never gone into the specifics of what, exactly, she was making. *Magic Sight* (a strangely luminescent teal liquid in a thin vial), *Tall Potion* (small bottle, of course), *Hair Color: Green* (milky green as advertised), *Hangover Cure* (clear as water), *Flexile Stimulant* (dark purple in an ampoule), *Girl Potion*...

He chuckled in awkward surprise. "Girl Potion?" he said to no one in particular. He looked left, then right, then picked up the bottle. The liquid went from clear to colorful as it swirled within the glass, cycling through different hues before settling back into a subtle shimmer. Like a transparent rainbow. Well. It certainly *looked* magical. Could it really...?

"...just like you said," came a voice from the back hallway. "I mean, if it works, alright, but honestly Marcy I'm not sure I'm seeing what you're—"

As it got closer and closer he scrambled to put the bottle back, almost tipping over the surrounding potions in the process. By the time Penelope had reached the front of the shop he was leaning on the counter, trying to be as calm as humanly possible but doing a bad job of it.

She stared at him silently for a moment before recognition hit. Had he changed that much? "Ah," she said into her phone, raising a finger in his direction, "can I call you back? Haha, yyyup." She scratched the freshly-trimmed patch of hair on the side of her head. "Okay. You too, bye." She quickly put her phone away and looked at him, suppressing a grin. "Hey kiddo, been a while."

"H-hi Penny," he said. "Um... congrats on the shop! And, uh, you know, graduation and everything. Mom and dad haven't stopped talking about it since I got here."

Penelope stepped up to the counter and sat down in the lone chair behind it. "I bet," she said, pulling her hair back up from the side and tying it into a ponytail. "Glad you could make it before the opening. And, you know, your residency thing. It sounds like a big deal."

"Haha, yeah," he said, picking up a business card from the counter display and turning it over and over in his hand. "They really like my new stuff, I guess."

"Sounds like it. I could never make sense of that impressionist stuff."

"Uh, expressionist," he carefully said under his breath, then quickly added, "but yeah, it's... it's just something I tried one night to get through an art block. I closed my eyes and just, you know..." He lifted his hand, as if he was holding a small instrument; a brush, presumably. He drew in the air, tracing wide circles, punctuating with rapid dots and dabs along the circumference. The night was still fresh in his mind; the canvas, the phosphorescent paint, the show playing in the background...

"Like that. I was inspired."

Penelope had slowly leaned to the side halfway through his description. "Uh huh, I bet," she said, looking past him to the suitcase still up against the wall, near the front door. "All packed up and ready to go, huh?"

"Uh, yeah," he said, following his sister's gaze. "Said goodbye and everything." He looked back to her. "I'm glad I could drop by too. I would've felt so bad not seeing you before I left. You know, for real."

"For sure," she said, eyes still on the suitcase. She sat back up and looked at him. "You really don't want a ride to the airport?"

"I told you, I'm fine," he said, looking aside as he took a step back. "I planned it all out. I can do it on my own."

Penelope raised her hands. "Okay," she said.

He weathered the following silence for as long as he could, looking around the two of them. He glanced at the potion rack next to the counter. "So this is what you're making, huh? Magic in a bottle? That's pretty wild."

Penelope gave a slight smile of relief. "Yup! I've been beefing up my inventory with big batches of more conventional potions, but later I want to stock these shelves up here with samples of the interesting stuff. You know, grab folks' attention. Push them into some impulse buys."

"Samples?" he asked. "Like... can you do that?"

She grinned. "I can do anything. If I wanna give out magic samples, no one can stop me. Not even the council, they already gave their okay." She tapped an official-looking certificate framed on the wall. "That's why it's called Penny Pots; it's mine. I'm the boss."

He looked at the potions on the rack again. *Magic Sight, Tall Potion, Hair Color: Green...*

"Wanna try one?" Penelope asked. "You know, just while you're here. I can give you something to make it wear off when you leave."

"Uh," he replied, staring at her wide-eyed. "Try... one?"

"Yeah," she said. "On the house. Be my first potion sampler."

His gaze fell on the potion racks once more. "Any... potion?" he asked, his hand slowly making its way across the row of bottles. *Hangover Cure, Flexile Stimulant...*

"Any potion," his sister replied, her face neutral aside from a nearly imperceptible smile.

"So, uh, I'm guessing this is a hangover cure?" he asked, lifting the bottle slightly.

"Yup. It actually works; that's magic for you."

"Flexile Stimulant...?"

"Makes you really limber for a while. Also treats joint pain."

He hesitated. "And, uh," he began to say, lifting up the one that said *Girl Potion*, "what... what will this one do?"

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

"...Huh," he said, looking back at the bottle in his hand. Getting lost in the nearly imperceptible colors of the clear liquid inside. Not putting it back quite yet.

Neither of them spoke for a long moment.

"C'mon, I'll show you around," Penelope finally said as she stood up, heading for the back hallway. "Pick whichever one you want and follow me. Any of 'em should be good for a laugh! Well, maybe not the hangover one."

"Ah, yeah, haha," he said as he hesitantly stepped away from the rack, bottle still in hand. He cradled it against his chest as he followed his sister further into the back of the store.

2

"...And this is my lab," Penelope said as she entered the room that took up most of the space in the back of the store.

"Oh wow, this close to your office?" he asked, fanning himself from the sudden heat. "Aren't alchemy labs always in separate buildings or something?"

"I made sure it was really well insulated," she said, giving the wall a couple of taps. "Heat, sound, humidity, everything. Otherwise whatever I've got brewing in here would make the rest of the shop unbearable. Customers don't like a smelly store *or* a muggy one, and I gotta live above the place."

"Oh wow you've got a cauldron," he said with a wide grin, crossing over to the far side of the room. "Is that like, cast iron? It looks so heavy!" He didn't dare touch the metal; it radiated a low heat and, upon closer inspection, there was some sort of liquid simmering inside.

"It's neutral enough not to affect what's in it, which is the important part," she said, walking over to the wide counter with the chemistry equipment and leaning against it. "You should drink that here."

"Hm?" he asked, puzzled.

She pointed to his chest. He was still clutching the bottle.

"Oh, uh, right, haha," he said, giving it another look. Making sure he'd grabbed the right one. "Is there, uh, something I should do, or..."

"Nah you just drink it," she replied, checking her phone. "It's kind of the whole deal with potions, they're real straightforward. Just don't stop in the middle. One go."

"Oh. What happens if I...?"

"Same thing that happens if the effects don't mesh well with your system, or if the reagents went bad somewhere in the process. The potion fails, you throw it up."

"Ohh. Jeez," he said, looking back at the bottle. "Does that happen often?"

"I graduated at the top of my class, so not very often," Penelope said, putting her phone away. She crooked her thumb at the sink next to her, then pointed out a couple of the floor drains. "But you can never be too careful, so here we are. I don't want to have to clean the floors *again* before I open."

He nodded. The bottle had one of those cork stoppers; he gave it a careful tap.

"Bottoms up," Penelope said. "I swear it won't hurt. Might taste a bit weird though; taste buds don't really know how to deal with magic

reagents."

"Uh, sure," he said, gently working the cork out until the bottle popped open. He raised the potion, waiting until the liquid inside stopped its multicolored swirl and settled into transparent stillness. Was he really going to do this?

Well. It should be good for a laugh, right?

He gently tipped the bottle, inching the contents toward his lips slowly but surely until the first splash hit... and tasted like nothing. Not even tap water; nothing at all. Before he could fully process what he was drinking, the bottle was empty. He looked down. Save for the slight cooling sensation going down his throat, there was barely a sign he'd drank anything at all.

"Which one did you end up picking?" Penelope asked, looking at the bottle with a sidelong glance.

"Oh, uh..." he began to say, showing her the bottle. Not quite able to finish the sentence.

"Cool," she said noncommittally. "Ever drink a magic potion before?"

"Not really," he answered, turning the empty bottle around in his hands. Waiting for something, anything, to happen.

Penelope nodded. "First time. Nice. Glad I'm here for that."

"How..." he said before taking a deep breath. "How will I know it's working?"

"You'll know," she said, eyeing him carefully.

"Oh. Does it—ulp!"

He barely had time to stifle the sudden gasp before Penelope was upon him, taking the bottle out of his hands as she quickly turned him toward the sink with practiced ease. He stared down the drain, wide-eyed, for a tense few seconds. But nothing happened; just the initial tremor, somewhere deep below... and after that, nothing.

"Sorry about this," his sister said as she carefully put the empty bottle down on the counter. "It happens. Just take deep breaths and let it work its way out of your system. I'm here."

He inhaled, then exhaled, awaiting the telltale wave of nausea... but it never came. He turned to Penelope. "How did you know it'd... aah?"

There was a second gasp, then a third, and then the sudden pulses originating in his stomach radiated out into a steady vibration that overcame his entire body. He stood back up straight as the blood rushed to his head, but the dizziness refused to be shaken off. Penelope wrapped her arms around him as he teetered, guiding him back into a stable position as fire flowed through his veins. At least, only the good parts of fire; the energy, the warmth, the primordial comfort. Pain was nowhere to be found.

Hypersensitivity rippled across his skin in pulses that shook him to his very core, each time almost causing him to lose his grasp on his

sister; but her hold on him remained unshakable. Penelope readjusted her position multiple times, making sure to keep him safe and standing as the changes overcame him.

He said, or maybe yelled, something. He couldn't make out the words proper, just a sense of urgency, bordering on panic. There was so much happening all at once. Maybe too much.

"It's okay," she said softly as she maintained her iron grip. "I've got you, it's okay." She kept him upright, stroking his back in as reassuring a way as she could manage. "Your body just needs a little time to adjust to..." She looked him over. "...A lot of new things."

As she said this, he could hear the source of his sister's voice inch its way further up every time his body shook. He'd seen his share of magic on a screen or in writing, but now it was starting to hit him that it was actually happening to him. He could feel his scalp tingle, his bones shift—gosh, were his bones shifting? Could that really happen? But there was no pain, how could it happen, how was this possible—and a thousand other tiny things change all over his body. It was all happening so fast. But his sister was there, soothing him with reassuring tones, and so it had to be okay. Everything was going to be okay.

They stood there for a while, Penelope gently patting his back, until they were both quite certain the changes were over.

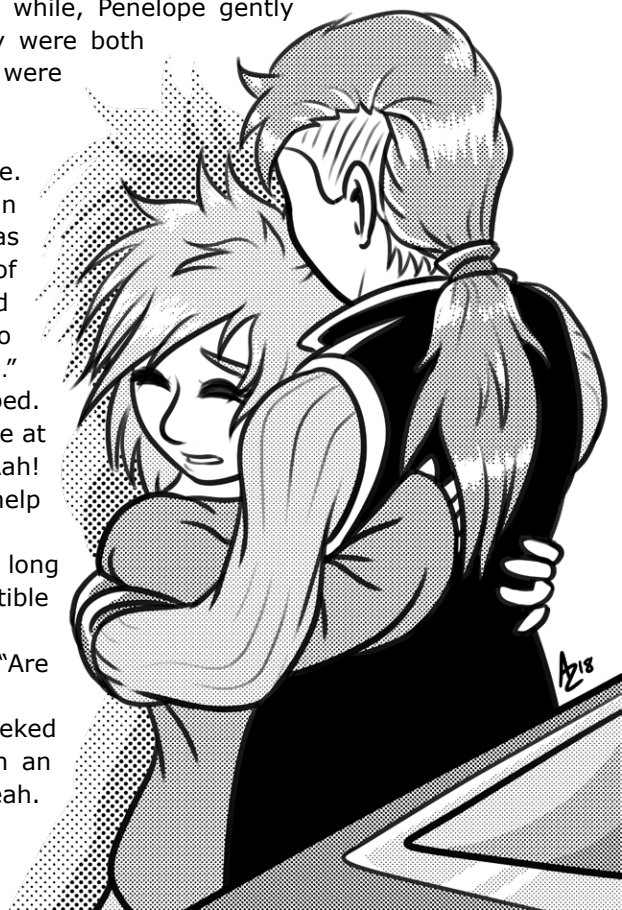
Magic was a lot.

He looked up to Penelope. Gosh, she was taller than him now. His entire body was filled with a tingling sort of pent-up energy, as if he'd just leapt out of bed ready to run a marathon. "Uh, is it..." he began to say, then stopped. "Uh? Ah?" he said, eyes wide at the sound of his voice. "Aah! Oh my gosh." He couldn't help but smile.

Penelope gave him a long look, her face an imperceptible mask.

"Penny?" he asked. "Are you... am I okay?"

Finally, emotions peeked through as she sighed with an almost nostalgic smile. "Yeah.



You're fine. Sorry I put you through all this."

He smiled, then furrowed his brow. "What's up?" he asked, staring at her.

"It's nothing," she said, letting him stand on his own as she took a step back.

He kept staring.

"It's just..." She looked at him again. Then she shook her head. "You just look so much like mom right now."

He laughed. "Really? Do you have a mirror? Oh, wait, I can just take a picture. Where's my phone..." he said, searching around in pockets that suddenly felt bigger than they used to.

Penelope took a deep breath. "Hey. You're gonna be here a bit, right?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, my flight's not for a while."

"Okay. My next batch's almost ready for bottling. Wanna see some alchemy?"

His eyes lit up instantly. "Yes!"

3

"Did my hair get longer?" he asked as he tucked a stray lock behind his ear.

Penelope rolled the case of empty bottles over on a small cart, transferring the contents over to the counter next to the cauldron. "Your nails too. It's a byproduct of transformation effects. There are some clippers in the top drawer next to the sink if it's too much."

"Oh. Uh, no, I'm good, thanks." He walked up to her, the goofy grin on his face not going away. Every step felt so *different*. "What are you making?"

She pointed to the simmering opaque liquid in the cauldron. "Affirmation potion."

He looked down into the large container. "A firm... what?"

"My bestseller," she said. "Or at least, that's the plan. Marcy got me the recipe. Her hometown has one of the first magic schools; the healthcare system over there is pretty big on magic. This is part of it." She stretched her arms out to the sides, then gently twirled her hands in the air before pressing the tips of her index fingers to her temples. She blinked a few times as her eyes adjusted, then nodded to herself.

"Marcy?" he asked, staring into the milky-white bubbles. "Oh, your old dorm roommate?"

"Yup."

"Are you two still, uh...?"

"What? Oh, no, no. We're still good friends, though."

"Ohh, okay." He looked up at her, rolling the words around in his mouth first. "Got a, uhh, new girlfriend?"

She sighed. "I'm kinda taking a break from girlfriends right now."

"Oh." He stared back at the cauldron. "New... boyfriend?"

She *sighed*. "Them too."

"Got it," he said quietly.

Penelope put her hand down into her apron pocket and closed her eyes. She lifted her hand, holding a small instrument; a wand, presumably. She drew in the air above the cauldron, tracing wide circles, punctuating with rapid dots and dabs along the circumference. Below, waves followed in her wake.

He stared slack-jawed. The liquid was moving by itself.

"Oh, right," she said, looking around. "I forgot you can't see this. Hold on." She walked over to some sort of tool rack, returning with a pair of goggles. "Here, put these on."

"Uh, okay," he said, fumbling with the strap. It was a lot trickier to

put this sort of thing on with long hair. "What are they supposed to—woah!" His eyes went wide as he focused through the lenses.

Penelope wasn't just making random motions in the air; she was tracing a magic circle. As she concentrated, the tip of her wand glowed, and she used it like a pen to write on the empty air above the cauldron. Just as he'd pictured it.

"Is that... magic? What's it doing?"

"Mixing. This potion has some ingredients that won't actually interact under normal circumstances. So I gotta make 'em."

He looked down, a little crestfallen. "So you couldn't just, you know... Make magic potions? If you didn't know magic, I mean."

She shrugged. "I mean, you'd need a little. I'm an alchemist *and* a witch; I can pretty much do anything. But there's plenty of folks out there who just do alchemy. It's a bit trickier; you need a lot more tools, most of them magical, and you need to be able to use them. And if you can't also charge them, it's gonna get real expensive real fast." She put her wand away, letting the process work its magic inside the cauldron. "So yeah. Some expertise required, but you don't need the whole six year degree. I know some night class alchemists, they're cool people."

"Ohh," he said, still fascinated by the glowing symbols floating in midair. "Six years? Gosh, it feels like you were there forever."

"Hah!" Penelope laughed as she prepped the empty bottles. "Nope, just the six. And a summer's worth of business classes. Cora helped a lot with that."

"Cora?"

"She's, uh, on the council," Penelope said, staring at the bottle in her hand. "One of the first witches. Helped found the school I went to, keeps in touch with the staff and some alumni. She's nice. Anyway!" She snapped out of it, reaching for the ladle rack. "Affirmation potion." She began to transfer some of the liquid into the first bottle, the glass fogging up and going white at the difference in temperature. "You know how true names work?"

His face lit up. "Yeah!" He struck a pose. "Your true name is the blueprint of your soul!" There'd been an entire half-season arc about true names and...

He lost his train of thought. Gosh, he still wasn't over how his voice sounded. When he said that catchphrase, he'd sounded almost like h—

Penelope snorted. "Right, of course, who did I think I was talking to? Let's stick to the real world for now. Say you heat something up"—she raised the filled bottle in her hand, shaking it lightly—"it wants to get back to room temperature, right?"

He nodded.

"Right," Penelope said as she put the bottle down. "Now, say I take you outside right now..."

He froze like a deer in the headlights. He looked down at himself; his clothes, oversized as they might have been at the moment, still weren't able to hide the undeniably different shape his body had. His heart raced at the thought of just... going outside like this.

"...and get your ears pierced. When the potion runs out, will your ears stay pierced?"

He blinked. "Uh..." he said, looking down. Nothing he'd watched or read had ever been so specific. Would his ears stay pierced? What would make sense? ...come to think of it, did he actually want to go—

"Thing is," Penelope said as she started filling another bottle, "true names have layers. There's an indelible core that you can't change. Well, that you absolutely *shouldn't* change. But there's lots of wrapping around it that's affected by all sorts of things. Age, injuries, cosmetic choices... Some of it sticks, some of it doesn't. Depends on the spell. Some of it's impossible to change. Some of it's just *really* hard to change." She put the steaming potion aside, moving on to the next one. "Hard, but not impossible."

He nodded, lost in thought.

"That's where affirmation potions come in. They have minor transformative properties; nothing outlandish, nothing a body couldn't do by itself, but all in that really-hard-to-change area of the ol' blueprint." Penelope moved on to another empty bottle, working a little faster each time. "The important part is that whatever they do is in alignment with how the drinker feels; it changes them in ways that make them more comfortable with themselves. And over time, that moves the needle; use them regularly for long enough and those layers around the core start shifting to match."

"Wait," he said, "how does that work? How does the potion... know?"

"It doesn't," Penelope said, filling another bottle. "It follows the lead of whoever drinks it. Marcy was on them for most of the time we roomed together so I got to understand the process. The way she put it? She knew what would make her comfortable; every potion just let her get closer. It's like that tall potion I have out front, it lets you decide just how much taller you want to be. Won't really work past a foot, though."

He looked at her. "How much do they cost?" he asked, a little too quickly.

Penelope grinned. "Affirmation potions? Nothing. That's the best part! They fall under healthcare; customers don't pay a cent, I get paid in full. Well, after some paperwork." She moved on to the next bottle. "That's why it's going to be my bestseller. Plenty of demand for magical alternatives around here. For all it's worth, the witches quarter here is a bit behind the times, so Penny Pots is gonna change that."

"Huh," he said, losing himself in his own ruminations again. "How long did Marcy have to drink those?"

"I forget," Penelope said, having to reach deeper and deeper into the cauldron with every new bottle. "A couple years, maybe more?"

"Oh. How often?"

"Once a week. There's a whole process to it: you have to dispel it before it runs out—so the potions she made lasted two weeks, just in case—then drink a new one shortly after. Mindfulness plays into it a bit. Marcy made a whole ritual out of it, said it helped her a lot. She tried stuff out at first, took her changes in different directions, but eventually figured out her comfort zone. And every time she dispelled the potion, less of it went away. Eventually the dispel potions did nothing. Then she had to stop."

"How come?"

Penelope glanced at the sink over by the other wall. "Because if the drinker is happy with what they look like, the magic has nothing to change; the potion fails."

He swallowed. "Oh."

Penelope put the ladle down; the cauldron was empty. She picked up the first potion she'd bottled out of the batch, swirling it around in her hand as she turned to face him.

He took a deep breath. He held up his phone, looking at the face the camera showed; looking at the clock above it, ticking. There was so little time left before he'd need to get on a bus, board a plane, fly across an ocean, start a new life. Better make the most of it.

He looked back at the empty bottle next to the sink. "So how long does that *Girl Potion* last?"

"I dunno," Penelope said, giving him a long look. "I don't make girl potions."

He gave an awkward chuckle. "What?"

She kept staring, her face an imperceptible mask.

He pointed to the sink. "But... I drank it! The potion you had out front, it said..."

Penelope looked at the potion in her hand. It had cooled back down to room temperature, the liquid within going through various hues before settling back into a subtle shimmer.

A transparent rainbow.

She looked back at him.

His blood ran cold. "No," he said, "listen, it's..." He looked down at his body, eyes wide, heart beating a mile a minute, mouth open, struggling to find the words, any words. "I... I don't... I'm not..."

Penelope stood up, briskly crossed the space between them and wrapped her arms around him. Holding him close.

He hugged back as the tears started flowing.

4

It was a while before either of them moved again.

"You okay?" Penelope asked, finally, as they both started releasing their embrace.

"...I don't know."

"Listen," the big sister said as she stepped back, "sorry for springing all this on you. I didn't think anything was going to..." She paused. "I dunno. I just told Marcy about you, and I guess she saw... something? She wanted me to try this. Felt it was real important. I just didn't..." She paused again, looking at the empty sink. Took a frustrated breath.

"...You could've told me."

Penelope cleared her throat. "Listen. It's hard to get you to accept help. Even mom and dad suck at it. It had to come from you. Marcy figured this was the best way, so I went for it. She really didn't want you to leave without, you know... Without checking first."

There was a long silence.

The big sister swore under her breath as she stared at the ceiling. "Better now than in a gallery halfway across the world by yourself, yeah?"

Another long pause.

"Yeah?" Penny repeated.

"Mm."

Penelope looked down. Made eye contact. Exhaled sharply. "Listen, I'm... I'm here if you need anything, alright?" she said, almost pleadingly. "Anything."

"...What do I do now?"

Penelope sighed with a tired smile. "Anything you want. I could poke Marcy, find a witch overseas who isn't too far from your gallery, someone who could supply you. Or..." She took a deep breath. "I got dispel potions here, like I said."

"I don't want to go back."

"You don't have to," she replied with steely resolve. "I'm here, alright? If we can't find another alchemist, I will *ship* the damn things to your gallery."

"I don't want to go *back*," she said, looking up into her sister's eyes.

Penelope's entire demeanor softened at once. "Oh kiddo," she said, stepping in for another hug. "You don't have to."

She hugged back, hold on tightly. Taking a deep breath. Letting go again.

"You sure about this?" Penelope asked, a hint of worry on her face.

"Listen, when Marcy asked me to check in on you, I didn't mean to mess up your whole plans. You can still make the gallery thing work."

"There's no witches quarter over there," her younger sister said, looking back to the cauldron, to the potions on the counter. To the wand nearby. To the discarded goggles sitting next to it. "No magic. Not anywhere close by, at least. Not like here."

Penelope furrowed her brow. "Does that matter? Listen, don't worry about it, alright? Like I said, I can ship you the potions. I'll make more."

She thought back to the alchemical process her sister had shown her just moments before. The familiar way she held the wand, the luminous traces it left in the air, the way the elements all around were drawn to its movements... It didn't have to be figurative. Not anymore.

She stood up straight, suddenly burning with the same determination Penelope had displayed just moments earlier. "When does the semester start?" she asked.

Her older sister blinked. "Semester? But you just finished..."

"When. Does. The. Semester. Start?" she repeated.

"Wait," Penelope said, her eyes going ever-so-slightly wide. "You want to go..." She pointed at the back wall. Or rather, through it. "You want to go back to school? To *my* school?"

She nodded. "I'll do what it takes. If it's too late, I'll take night classes, I'll... I'll clean the principal's office! I'll..."

Penelope chuckled. "No, it's... Where is this coming from all of a sudden?"

Her sister looked up into her eyes. "I want to be a witch."

Penelope blinked. "You... This isn't like in your shows, you know that, right? This is the real deal."

"I don't want to pretend anymore."

Penelope gave her a long look. "*Six years*. And I took some prep classes just to be safe. Are you sure you're going to be—"

"You said *anything*."

Penelope stared back unblinking. Then she took a deep breath, smiled, and shook her head. "Alright. You got it. Classes start in... maybe two weeks? I think? You can stay here in my guest room until then. I'll call my old teacher, see what the late signup procedure is. Should be simple."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," her big sister replied with a shrug. "The problem isn't *getting* in, it's *staying* in. First semesters are notoriously rough, tons of folks find out it's too much work, or it's not what they expected. They're not closing the door on anyone."

"Oh," she said, nodding. "Okay. Good. Then I'm not worried."

"It *is* a really rough program, you know," Penelope said. "Becoming a witch takes a lot of work and a lot of time. I'd made my peace with

you going halfway across the world to do your art thing, it's something you're good at already! But this... You're starting over, here. Are you sure you're going to be alright?"

"It's okay Penny," her younger sister said, smiling. Before, she'd been going through the motions; chasing the shadow of a dream. But this was the real deal. This was something she'd wanted for as long as she could remember. And for the first time in her life, it felt possible. "I'll make it work."

5

The phone beeped and vibrated, shaking closer and closer to the sink.

She rushed through the open lab door to grab it, fumbling to turn off the alarm on her way back to the front of the shop.

Up at the counter, Penelope was pouring amber liquid into two shot glasses. "All good?" the alchemist asked, putting the bottle aside.

"Yeah," she said. "That was my flight. It's probably in the air by now." She took a deep breath. "It's done. I'm doing this."

Penelope smiled, handing her one of the glasses. "So, have you figured it out?"

"Yeah," she said with a smile, carefully accepting the shot of whiskey. "Amanda."

Penelope smirked.

"What?" Amanda asked.

"Do you want me to call you Mandy?" the older sister asked, barely containing her smile.

Amanda had trouble containing hers, too. "If you want," she said.

Penelope grinned. "Do you want me to call you *Magical Miracle Fancy Mand*—"

"MANDY IS FINE," Amanda said, staring into her glass, flustered and beet-red.

"It's cute," the older sister said, "I like it. Still fits into mom's rhyming scheme, too."

"Mm," Amanda said, a bit self-conscious. But she didn't care. That was her name now, and she liked it, and that's all that mattered. As far as the rest went...

"To Amanda," Penelope said, raising her glass.

Amanda burst into laughter. "PENNY!" she said, her blush returning.

"Hey," the alchemist said, "it's worth celebrating." She moved her glass closer to her sister's.

"To Amanda," the younger sister said, raising her glass as well.

Clink!

Amanda took a sip. Her eyes bulged slightly as the fire caught in her throat. But there was no going back, no giving ground. Not now. "Gosh," she said as she put the glass down, "this stuff is strong."

"Yeah, well, you know me," Penelope said, savoring hers. "No half-measures."

Amanda looked into her phone again. Not turning it on just yet; looking at the person reflected in it. Someone with familiar features,

albeit softer. Gentler. A little bit smaller. Eyes burning brighter than they ever had before. And that smile! Good gosh, that smile. To be honest though, the person looking back at her wasn't exactly *everything* she'd always wanted to be. But she was close. And as time went on, she would only get closer.

She took a deep breath. That was her. It was happening. She'd need to take some time to adjust, and process all this, but... it was *happening*. The last thing holding her back from indulging in that silly childhood dream was finally gone. Except it wasn't really silly anymore, was it? It was just easy to dismiss it when the person you looked up to was so different from you. Bring the two closer, and... what reason was there not to take the chance?

She might figure out that it wasn't for her after all, and go back to art. Or maybe she'd go through with it, and who knows where that might lead?

Either way, she'd make it work.

She smiled as she walked over to the front door, picking up her suitcase before circling around to the side room to get her backpack. First things first, find Penelope's guest bedroom, get situated. Probably sit on the bed and cry a lot and—

Amanda looked at the chair where she'd put her backpack down, suddenly remembering her encounter from earlier that day. There was so much left to discover, wasn't there?

"Oh! You didn't tell me you got a cat!" the younger sister said as she headed for the stairs.

"I didn't," Penelope said, putting the glasses away.



"Yeah," Penelope said, shifting her phone to her other hand as she walked around the store, turning off the lights as she did one last check before heading to bed. "Yeah, you were right. I don't know how you called it, but... Yeah."

The alchemist stared down at the tablet hooked up to the counter, turning it off. She swore under her breath as she gave her reflection a tired smile. "Marcy," she said. "I have a *sister*."

Penelope leaned back against the counter. "Hm?" she said as she tilted her head to the side. "Well, mostly. She's happy with the results, just... not the methods. So, you know. Something to keep in mind. But yeah. Thanks." She broke out into a smile. "Amanda says thanks, too."

She grinned as she did her rounds in the side room, pushing that one stubborn chair back against the table.

"Yeah. Yes, of course it's from that show! How'd *you* know?"

She walked up to the stairs, turning around one last time. Tomorrow was opening day; the start of a lot of things. Penelope gave her phone a sidelong glance.

"Oh, you don't have to worry, Marcy," she said, smiling ruefully. "She can be stubborn too, you should've seen how determined she was. But if anyone tries anything, they'll have to go through me."

Penelope turned the lights off, heading upstairs.

"I don't need luck. I have a sister, and I'm going to keep her safe."

Fin.



PENELOPE AND THE COUNCIL

A SUBSTITUTE FAMILIAR SHORT STORY



BY ALEX ZANDRA VAN CHESTEIN

AZ19



1

"Ma, we don't wear the witch's hat all the time," Emily said as she looked at the crayon drawing she'd gotten in the mail, dropping the empty envelope into the recycling bin. "Just for official business. And mine's not that big." She walked over to the mirror in front of her bed and gently tucked the artwork into the frame. "Of course I love it, Ma, it's perfect! Tell them they did a great job." She smiled and checked up on her outfit one last time, switching her phone to the other shoulder. "Oh, well good luck then! I've got a pretty big day too." She took a deep breath, giving her reflection a confident nod. "Of course, Ma. They're having me do all the paperwork, but I don't scare that easy. Gonna show 'em how it's done!"

Emily picked up her witch's hat and put it on, adroitly tilting it so it covered one of her poofy hair buns. Two steps later she was making her way down the hall; with a wave of her hand, the door to her room swung shut behind her. "Love you too," she said, before hanging up and slipping her phone into one of her robe's pockets.

Today was a big day indeed. Barely three weeks on the council and already her first trial—the first one anyone had seen in a while, too. It didn't help that the accused was one of her friends. But there was no reason to be nervous; she wasn't the one who'd brought up the motion, or seconded it, so all she had to do was the usual: write the minutes, consult the archives, and keep everyone on schedule.

And goodness gracious were council witches bad at staying on schedule. You'd never think it by looking at their impeccable outfits, but due to a mix of age, experience, and good ol' hubris, elder witches were among the most disorganized people Emily had ever met. Maybe, she thought, at some point you just stopped caring about the little things. The end result was that *she* was the one who had to care about them. Fair enough. This wasn't like the part-time jobs she'd get pressured into a lifetime ago, she reminded herself. She had graduated with honors, she'd shown what she was capable of, and now she was a council witch. She was going to make her family proud. She was going to be unstoppable.

She took another deep breath and suppressed the butterflies in her stomach as she began the walk downstairs to the main hall. At least the commute was a short one; living on the second floor of the council house had its advantages.

2

As Emily reached the bottom of the stairs, she carefully stepped around the sleeping dragon curled up on top of the nearby heating vent. Well, dragon-like demon, technically; what did names even mean anymore? The ground floor's open layout had been intended to mimic the council's own stance against gatekeeping and secrecy. Everyone could mingle here: all witches—accredited, in training or in-between—could come together to share what they'd learned and help one another. And that meant their familiars mingled, too. On days like this, the house's complement of magical companions liked to spend their mornings here instead of in the familiar den.

Something caught her eye as she passed a snugglepile of sunbathing familiars by the window. A particularly large jet-black ball of floof at the center of the snoozing demons caught her eye. Was that...? She hurried to the center of the hall.

Penelope was already there.

The meeting room was more of a meeting *area*, and even then it was mostly used by the council members as a catch-all lounge where they could share drinks and loosely discuss what was on the agenda. Emily had secured a small podium to help manage the council meetings, though she'd much rather have a proper desk and chair. All in due time, she figured. Council affairs did move at a somewhat glacial pace.

Penelope had no such patience. Early to her own trial, idly scrolling through something on her phone, she sat in one of the least comfortable chairs the room's haphazard distribution of seats could muster. This made Emily pause for a moment. It felt out of character for the alchemist, unless... Ah. She'd picked *that* chair. Of course she had.

Perhaps she'd briefly considered sitting in Cora's favorite seat, but Penelope had cut to the chase and picked the spot directly across from it. She'd be front and center, staring daggers at her the entire time. Now *that* felt in character. Emily worked with one and was friends with the other, but neither Cora nor Penelope had ever mentioned quite what had happened to drive a wedge between them. Now, whenever the two were in the same room together, sparks tended to fly.

Emily took a deep breath as she walked up to her corner podium and hung her hat on one of its corners. This was an awkward situation, but hopefully they could all stay on good terms; Emily was glad to have the two witch sisters among her friends. "Hey Penny," she said as she pulled up her tablet.

"Emily," Penelope said in greeting, eyes glued to her phone. If she

was nervous, she was keeping it in check quite well.

"The council's not going to be back for a bit," Emily said as she looked over the day's schedule. Then she caught herself. "Well, the rest of the council. They're meeting for brunch over at You-Topia, then swinging by Mandy's shop before coming back. Nothing says you need to spend the whole morning here waiting for them."

"It's not like I have anywhere else to be right now," Penelope said as she put her phone down for a moment. She gave Emily a long look, her tone dropping to sub-zero temperatures. "Or later, depending on how this goes."

Emily stared back incredulously. "You really think they're—you think *we're* gonna close down your shop?" She leaned an elbow on the podium. "Look at you, getting all riled up already. The trial's not for a few hours at least, so ease up, alright? Conserve your energy."

Penelope narrowed her eyes.

Emily tilted her head. "Listen. I know this is stressful, but don't take it out on me. The council wants to work things out as much as you do."

"Yeah, well, they don't exactly have a history of being kind to folks in my situation."

Emily browsed through council trial archives. "What, Vincent?" She tapped through the relevant meeting minutes. "That was like a decade ago. Besides, dude turned *himself* into a demon—he was long gone to the otherworld before anyone from the council even showed up. And half the folks on that council have moved on since." She looked back to Penelope. "Worlds of difference."

"They don't talk about what he did before. Not anymore. Did you get the same history professor I did? There was nothing about his research, nothing on his breakthroughs. Just some witch who did a terrible thing." Penelope looked off to the side. "Just a cautionary tale."

"Penny." Emily turned off her tablet and leaned on her podium with both elbows. "You're here, now. We're all gonna sit down and talk it over calmly, between adults. You've helped a bunch of people, whether you wanted to or not. That's gonna count for something."

"I'm more useful accredited than banished. Is that what you're getting at?"

"Maybe, if I was a pragmatist. But that sounds more like something charming ol' Avi would say, and they're off having brunch with everyone. Right now you're talking to me. And I'm not here to fight, so calm down already, yeah? It may be a trial on paper, but you don't have to go and make it one in person."

Penelope sighed, going back to her phone. "Wait," she said as she put it back down. "Everyone? Even Bern?"

Emily laughed. "Nah, you know Bern doesn't believe in brunch. He's still working at the Circle, taking care of whatever emergency's keeping

him busy. He'll be here later. Maybe even in time for a vote, if there is one. The man should be an honorary firefighter by now."

"Hm. He's not going to visit the store?"

"Doesn't need to. He already met Emilyynn."

"Oh," Penelope said, suddenly pensive. "Right. That's what all this is about."

Emily nodded, going back to the schedule. "Mm hm. It's bigger than you. Not by much, mind; mice are pretty small."

"Hah. You should've seen her when she first came in."

"Oh yeah? Taller than I was?"

Penelope grinned.

Emily shot back a smirk. "Scrawnier too, I'm betting."

"Eh, now? I could probably lift her with one arm. She's all floof." Penelope glanced at the pile of snuggling demons on the windowsill. "Not as much as Esmeralda, but still."

Emily followed her gaze. "You know, for all the bad rap Es gets here with the council folks, she's real popular with everyone's familiars."

Penelope nodded. "She's very comfy."

Emily stepped away from the podium and headed over to the kitchenette to put a kettle on. "And with everyone out, she's got plenty of time for a quiet reunion." She turned around and leaned back on the counter. "Good thing you came in so early."

Penelope went back to her phone. "Funny how things turn out."



3

Emily breathed a sigh of relief when the front door opened. At last, the council was here—the *rest* of the council, she corrected herself, again—and things could get underway. Her reassurance was short-lived, however, as only a single (albeit well-dressed) witch in council garb crossed the threshold.

"Hey Avi," Emily said, trying to coat her confusion in civility. "Where's... everyone else?"

"They will get here," Avignon said with their familiar lilt as they adjusted their jacket's collar in the reflection of the phone floating alongside them. "They are just, you know, taking their time." The witch made their way across the meeting hall in a rhythmic stutter-step, weaving around the haphazardly-arranged seats—and abruptly stopping once they noticed Penelope.

"Ah. Penny," Avignon said with sudden unease, their phone floating just a bit ahead of them before hovering back to its spot over their shoulder. "It is, ah, early." They quickly adjusted the hem of their jacket, sneaking quick furtive peeks around the room as if searching for something.

Or someone.

Penelope greeted Avi with a "Hey," not lifting her eyes from her phone. "She's by the window."

The sharply-dressed witch glanced behind them as they lifted their hands to make a show of adjusting a cufflink. Their eyebrows shot up as they spotted the sleeping ball of obsidian fluff in the pile of familiars all the way across the hall. They nodded. "I see. Thank you," they said as most of the tension visibly left their body. They resumed their walk across the room and overshot their usual seat, circling around to approach Emily, who was trying very hard not to give them the side-eye. As comfortable as her colleagues usually were with familiars, they sure didn't like being around that black cat.

"What's up?" the junior council member asked her senior coworker. Although there were not that many years between them, Avignon's thin mustache tended to give them an air of experience—which they often turned to their advantage.

Right now, however, Avignon's approach was uncharacteristically soft. They wanted something. "Pardon, Emily. My business today is quick, ah... it will not take a lot of time," they said, moving on from adjusting their now-impeccable jacket to fixing their hair. "Can we do that first? In case the trial, you know... *does* take time."

Emily leaned onto her podium with one arm and looked through the day's agenda. She didn't want the trial to take any longer than it needed to, considering how nervous it was visibly making Penelope. However, she knew the sort of work Avignon did; they were often navigating a sea of deadlines and blockers outside of their control, and if their action item absolutely needed to be addressed today, they might end up interrupting the trial to do so. Emily also knew just how long it took the council to get back up to speed when distracted. "Alright," she said, moving the schedule around. She looked back at Avi and subtly tilted her head toward Penelope. "I'd like to get the trial stuff done today. Your business won't take too long, will it?"

"Of course not, Emily," they said with a smile. "Thank you." Avi made their way back to their usual seat, attention redirected to their glistening haircut. The stylish witch spiked up their locks a final time, let out a relieved sigh, and smiled at their reflection. The phone chirped happily, then floated down into their jacket pocket.

Emily, meanwhile, walked outside to see where the rest of the council was. They were likely just as apprehensive about the trial as she was, but putting it off wasn't going to help anyone. She had just made it out of the council house's main entrance when the rest of her colleagues came into view through the surrounding foliage. No matter how well the trees and shrubs hid their approach, it was hard to ignore the elder witches considering how loud their outside voices were.

"Honestly Jackie, I have my doubts. Is it really safe to let her into the building?" Mildred asked as she wheeled herself along the path.

"Hah! She's harmless, Milly," Jacqueline said as she followed closely behind.

"But she can't be trusted!" Mildred insisted. She turned to look over Jacqueline's shoulder. "Right Cora?"

The witch behind them took off her pointed hat in order to fit under the archway her colleagues had briskly passed through. "Mildred," Cora said with a sympathetic smile, "she's the defendant's familiar. It'd be in poor taste to deny her, regardless of the risks."

"Oh, I just don't know," Mildred said. "Can we at least hold the hearing outside?"

"Well that would be a bigger insult, wouldn't it?" Cora said as she stepped into the light, the sun hitting her short grey hair in a way that made it look positively metallic. "Let's just grin and bear it."

Mildred answered with a solitary, prolonged sigh.

Cora rolled up her hat with both hands into a long twist of fabric that lost the shape and definition it had moments before. "It's a short meeting," she continued. "Besides, Penelope's sister asked to be present as well, and you've seen how well she and Esmeralda get along. I'm sure she'll keep her in a good mood."

"Oh, I suppose," Mildred said with a hint of sulking.

"Mm. It'll be done before you know it," the silver-haired witch said, unrolling the garment in her hands into a shawl and draping it over her own shoulders.

Emily approached her fellow council members as they got closer to the entrance. "Welcome back," she said, walking over to Mildred and Jacqueline. "Do you need anything?"

Jacqueline shook her head with a smile and opened the heavy wooden door for her colleagues.

"Thank you dear, but we're fine," Mildred said as she headed inside.

"We've made it this far together, no sense in stopping now!" Jacqueline said as she followed Mildred in. "Besides, it's good exercise. Right Milly?"

"Oh I suppose so," the elder witch replied as she rolled into the meeting room and began the ritual she performed every time she returned from the outside world. Mildred folded up the blanket covering her legs, got up, gave her favorite armchair a light dusting, sat down, and draped the blanket over her legs again. With a few practiced flicks of her wrist, she collapsed her wheelchair once, twice, three times, folding it down like a large fan that she rested against the back of an armrest. Jacqueline sat down next to her not too long after, as Avi brought cups of tea for each of them.

Emily got her notes in order from her podium. They were barely a few minutes behind, now. Not bad at all. Bern's spot remained empty as foretold, but the rest of the council was finally here, and all had found their seats.

All save one, who made her way across the room and sat down in the antique chair directly across the one where Penelope was sitting. Cora among friends, to the rest she was Terpsichore of the first modern witches, head of the council. She looked down her nose at the brooding alchemist. "Penny," she said in a modest greeting.

"Mm," Penelope replied, eyes still on her phone.

Terpsichore rested her elbows on the armrests of her chair and steepled her fingers for a moment. She then reached aside with her left hand, tracing lazy circles in the air with ritualistic precision.

Her porcelain cup eventually made its way to her, floating gently on an invisible sea of tea scents and palpable tension. She took a sip, her eyes still on Penelope.

The alchemist finally put away her phone, looking up to meet Terpsichore's gaze. "Cora," she answered.

Emily exhaled silently. "Alright," she said loudly, "enough members present and accounted for! Let's begin. First action item of the day, Av—"

"Emily?" Mildred said in a loud whisper.

"Uh. Yes?"

"Where is...?" Mildred trailed off as she made a show of looking around the room.

Emily squinted for a moment, a bit lost.

Avi cleared their throat, crooking their thumb toward the pile of snuggling familiars on the windowsill.

The elder witch looked over, noticed Esmeralda, and breathed a sigh of relief at the distance separating her from the large black ball of fluff. "Thank you," she said, then turned back to Emily. "Please continue."

"Thank *you*," Emily replied, returning her attention to her meeting notes. She knew most of the council didn't really care for Penelope's familiar, but this was getting ridiculous. Prehensile floof aside, she was just a cat. "Now, first action item: council member Avignon's report on our sister council project across the pond."

Avignon nodded with a smile. "Thank you, Emily. My friends back home have agreed to the proposal. It will be like our other international programs of outreach, except in this case, there is already a council there; we will be talking witches to witches. It will make things easier, also faster." The witch made a handshake gesture with both hands. "They have students here, we have students there, it is simple."

Terpsichore raised an eyebrow. "Simple? Will you be handling the rest of the negotiations?"

Avignon gave her a sparkling smile. "Of course, as usual."

The elder witch gave a small nod. "Hm. Well then, that settles that. Keep us posted."

"So... is that a vote?" Emily asked. Like it or not, she had to take care of the resulting paperwork, and she didn't want to leave anything open to interpretation. Especially when other councils were involved.

"Ah. I suppose that does require an official ruling. Very well," Cora said, straightening up in her seat. "Thank you dear." She took off her shawl and snapped it back into the shape of a hat, putting it on.

Everyone else did the same, remaining firmly seated (albeit in a more proper position) and putting on their pointy hats. Everyone save Penelope, who was suddenly extremely interested in whatever was on her phone. But, she wasn't part of the council, and this particular motion didn't involve her, so she had no reason to follow decorum.

"Motion to proceed with Council Member Avignon's proposal," Terpsichore said as she raised her hand.

"Motion seconded," Avignon said, imitating the gesture.

"All in favor?" Emily asked as she prepared to tally the votes.

"Aye," everyone said in a casual sort of relative unison.

"Motion passes," Emily said as everyone quickly leaned back into their seats and took their hats off again. "Alright then, that was fast enough! Moving on..."

Terpsichore gave Penelope a sidelong glance. "Speaking of our students over there, isn't your old partner in crime one of them?"

Penelope was not amused. "We broke curfew *once*," she replied. "Also no, Marcy isn't 'there' now, she's like a country or two over."

"You were *caught* breaking curfew once," Terpsichore corrected. "But, six of one, half-dozen of the other," she continued, gesturing with her off hand. "It's the same general area."

Avignon cleared their throat noisily.

Terpsichore looked over to them. She blinked several times, then raised her hand in a conciliatory gesture. "Right, you're right. Distinct cultures and histories. I apologize."

Emily waited a beat. "Mm hm! Moving *on*," she repeated, eyeing the clock. The more they delayed this trial, the higher the chance of it taking multiple days, and she wanted to avoid that as much as possible. She opened her mouth, trying to find the right words, but ultimately settled on a sigh. "Let's just get to it, we know why we're here. Trial by council of Penelope, accredited witch and alchemist. Demonic corruption of a third party."

Penelope straightened up instantly and opened her mouth to speak—

"Yes hold on, I know, mitigating factors," Emily quickly added. "This case isn't clear-cut, we're gonna work it out. Let's just put what we know out there for the record first, alright? There's the subject, Emilyynn, a local entrepreneur..."

"Entrepreneur." Penelope interjected in utter disbelief. "*That's* the word you're going with."

"I mean, isn't that what she did?" Emily said. "You know, before this whole thing happened. Started a string of small companies."

Penelope just stared back at the junior council member. "I *guess*," she said. As Emily continued her retelling of the last couple of months, the alchemist leaned back and let her gaze wander around the room. She and Terpsichore exchanged the occasional glance, with Avignon staying well out of their way.

Mildred and Jacqueline, meanwhile, gave the new council member their full attention. Emily always appreciated that about the pair; despite being two of the most experienced magical academics around, their curiosity had never waned, and neither had their respect for fellow witches. They were clearly interested in what Emily had to say. And whenever a factoid gave one of them pause, the other would lean in and whisper an explanation, making both of their prominent heads of hair—Mildred's perm and Jacqueline's natural frizz—squish together like a couple of sponges. One detail, however, made the darker-haired witch perk up.

"Yes, the demon potions!" she exclaimed with a bright grin, repeating what Emily had just mentioned. She turned to Penelope. "You did bring

them, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I brought 'em," Penelope replied as she reached for the box behind her chair. She slid it around to the front, then pushed it toward the center of the circle of chairs with her foot. "Here you go."

"Here I go indeed!" Jacqueline said as she leaned forward and snatched one of the potions right out of the moving box in a fluid, excited motion. She bounced in her seat, putting on a monocle as she examined the bottle closely. "Oh I have SO many theories!"

"Honestly, Jackie," Mildred said with a tinge of embarrassed resignation. "Have some decorum, please."

"Life's too short for decorum," Jacqueline said as she methodically tilted the bottle to one side, then the other. "Especially in the presence of a breakthrough."

Terpsichore leaned to the side to give the two witches some space and get a more direct line to Penelope. "Is that all of them, Penny?"

"Mm," she replied, looking at her phone again.

"Pennyyy," she repeated, lingering on the last vowel.

"What?" the alchemist asked, looking up at her. Their eyes locked again.

Terpsichore took a long sip of her tea, not breaking eye contact. "Emily," she finally said, "bring the truthmaker."



4

Emily carefully handed Terpsichore the box, having dusted it on the way back from the cellar. She hoped to get used to the council house's vault sooner rather than later. Though her room was two whole floors above it, she swore she could hear the faint groans and hums from her bed at night when she tried to sleep. Everything was safe and secure, to be certain; magic wasn't anywhere near as dangerous as the shows made it out to be. But still, that was a lot of energy to store in one place, despite how careful and proactive the council was about disposal.

The head of the council placed her teacup on the table next to her chair, then took the lid off the box and pulled the collar out. Ostensibly made of simple studded black leather, the so-called 'truthmaker' wouldn't turn any more heads than usual were it not for the prominent gem chained to it. The crystal emitted a very dull glow as Terpsichore manipulated it. "Thank you, dear," she said as she unclasped the collar.

Penelope crossed her arms. "Just a trial on paper, hm?" she said, giving Emily a look.

The junior council witch frowned.

"Penny, my dear Penny," Terpsichore said before Emily could reply, "part of the reason you're here before us is that you weren't exactly forthcoming with little..." She quickly glanced at her phone. "...Emilynn. It's only natural for us to take prec—"

"L-little?" Penelope sputtered, almost rising out of her chair. "She's not a *child*. This was a contract between two adults. Hell, she's older than ME!"

Mildred blinked. "My goodness. Is she really?"

"She doesn't look a day over twenty," Jacqueline added. "That's *magic*."

"It is, actually," Penelope said through gritted teeth.

Terpsichore made a calming gesture in the alchemist's direction. "Penny."

Penelope took a deep breath and leaned back into her seat, not breaking eye contact.

"Dang," Emily said, looking through the trial notes. "Well I'll be. Hah! You'd think that wouldn't really be a surprise anymore." She shot Avignon a knowing smirk; the stylish witch returned it. Across the room, Terpsichore and Mildred exchanged a similar, more subtle smile.

Penelope took advantage of the silence to stand up and step forward. "Fine. I'll do it," she said, extending her hand, palm up. "Give it here."

Terpsichore raised an eyebrow. "Come now Penny, you know as well

as I do how this one works." She made a sweeping gesture. "Truth compulsion is finicky magic, and requires a steady hand."

"You don't trust me," Penelope replied.

"Your fingers might stumble. You might miss a step. And then where will we be?" Terpsichore shook her head. "All that effort wasted. No, no. Besides, this is the first time we've done this sort of thing in a while, isn't it? All the more reason to make sure it's done properly." With that, the elder witch stood up and walked across the room, truth collar in hand.

Out of curiosity, Emily checked the archives on her tablet. Trials were few and far between, for one, but any sort of magical truth-telling was even rarer. Witches had a working agreement, as few understood them as well as each other. But sometimes, measures were taken to be absolutely sure that judgement wasn't clouded. Terpsichore's favorite way was the truthmaker.

And a tricky way it was. Being compelled to tell the truth was a very demon thing, after all. Any magic that worked on lies and the exclusion thereof had to involve some otherworldly influence, however limited. And given why Penelope was on trial in the first place? Emily wasn't sure if this was poetic justice, irony, or Cora letting things get personal.

Penelope looked up into Terpsichore's eyes with a steely gaze as the head of the council walked up to her. By the time she reached her side, the alchemist had already swept her long red hair to the side in one practiced motion, revealing her bare neck.

That's right, Emily realized. Amanda was the one who was really into necklaces and chokers, while Penelope usually favored turtlenecks and jackets with high collars. She'd have to adjust her shopping plans. Come to think of it, where *was* Amanda? She was overdue to appear here; maybe she'd gotten held up during her store's grand opening. Or maybe she'd run into Bern along the way. That'd be convenient.

Meanwhile, Terpsichore held up the unclasped collar. "Hold still and behave yourself, hm? For old times' sake?" she said, in a tone that did not invite an answer.

Penelope maintained eye contact, not saying a word as Terpsichore closed the truthmaker around her neck.

"Now, about those demon potions of yours," the silver-haired witch said as she pointed to the open box, "is that all of them?"

"No," Penelope said as she straightened out her hair.

"See? Now we're getting somewhere," Terpsichore said as she returned to her seat.

The alchemist motioned to Jacqueline with her head. "Jackie's holding one."

Terpsichore rolled her eyes as she reached for her cup of tea. "Oh for goodness' sake." She took a sip, then shook her head with a chuckle.

"That's our Penny, I suppose! Ever a slave to technicalities."

Penelope shrugged, returning her attention to her phone as the older witch across from her took a sip.

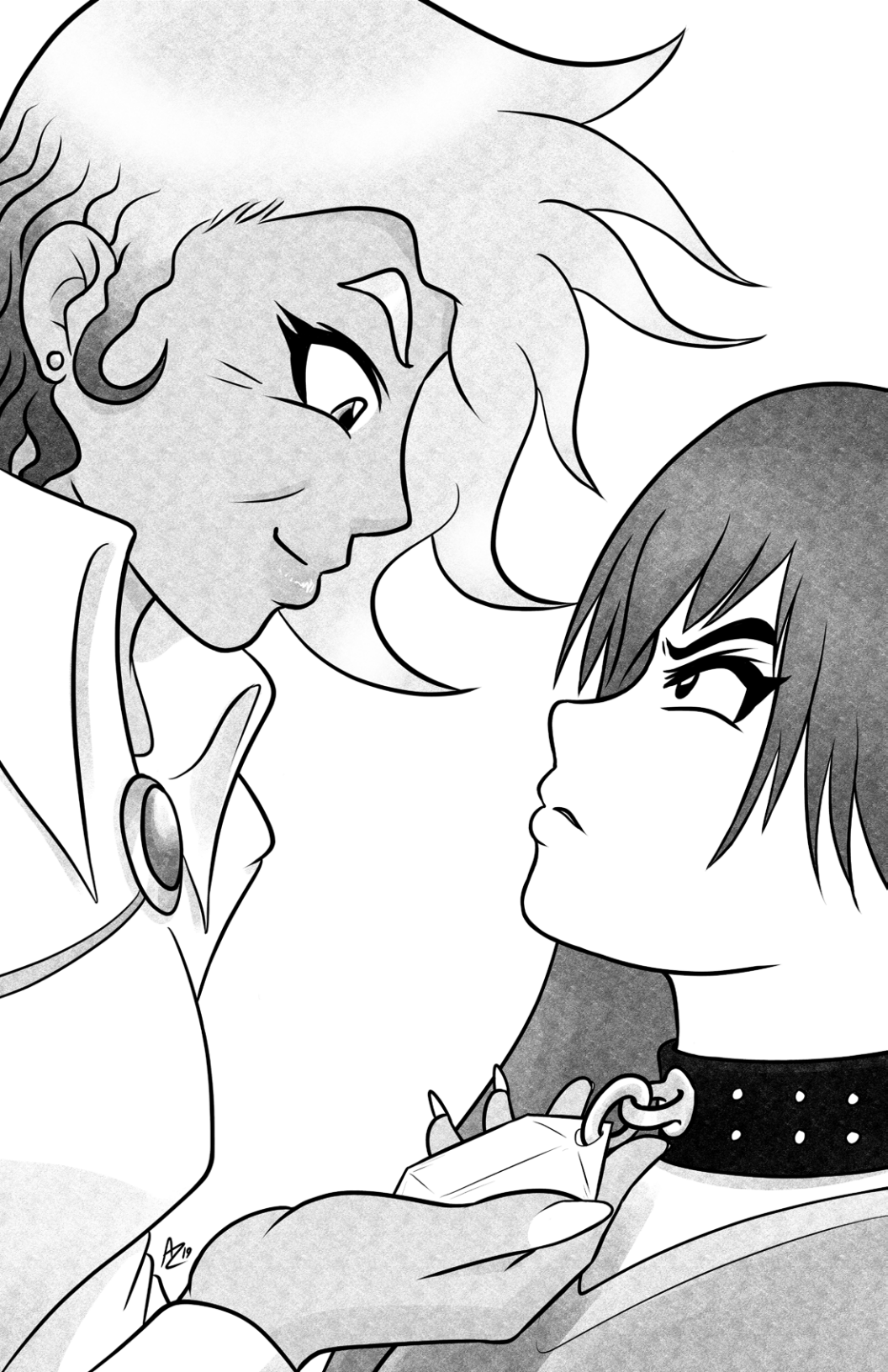
"Hm," Terpsichore muttered thoughtfully. "Penny," she said as she looked at the alchemist, "where are all of your demon potions right now?"

Penelope looked up from her phone again. She frowned.

"Penny," the silver-haired witch said with a hint of a smile.

"The lot in that box," Penelope answered, "one in Jacqueline's hands..." She trailed off, but the gem on the collar around her neck started to glow. "...and two in my lab's safe," Penelope blurted out. She pursed her lips shut, a hint of color on her cheeks.

Terpsichore grinned triumphantly. "So clever!" she said excitedly, looking at her fellow council witches one by one. "Now *that's* our Penny! Isn't she clever?" Her gaze fell on Penelope once more. "Well! You did bring *most* of them; that's a gesture of goodwill, I suppose. Let's continue."



5

"Brilliant, just brilliant," Jacqueline said as she flipped her monocle over and gave the demon potion an even closer look. "You used one of Milly's containment techniques! It's hard to make that stick to liquids, and usually not worth the effort... but I see why you did that here. This is potent stuff. *Reversible* potent stuff, correct?"

Penelope nodded. "Yeah, a dispel potion cancels it right out."

"How convenient," Mildred said. "It's too bad that Emilyynn girl never properly studied magic. An academic perspective of her side of the process would have been fascinating. Ah well."

"Perhaps she'll be interested to learn now," Terpsichore said.

Mildred leaned over. "Cora," she said quietly, "the curriculum isn't exactly intended for, you know... demons."

Terpsichore gave the eldest witch a noncommittal shrug. "There's always tutoring."

Jacqueline looked at the rest of the potions in the box Penelope had brought to the council house. "Are they all from the same batch?"

Penelope looked at Jacqueline, then followed her gaze. "Yes," she said quickly.

Emily looked at Penelope. Something had caught her attention, but she wasn't sure what, exactly; moreover, she wasn't sure if it would be worth bringing everyone's attention to it.

Jacqueline nodded. "Getting the dosage right with this one must have been something. Too little and the containment wouldn't latch on; too much and the demonic influence might snowball and overwhelm it."

Emily took a deep breath. No one else seemed to have noticed. This felt important. Penelope was surprisingly good at talking her way around the truthmaker's influence. Had she figured out a way to answer less-than-truthfully? What was she hiding?

The junior council member looked at the notes she'd taken of the exchange just now. Was she trying to cover up something about batches? Had she made another one?...One that wasn't in this room just now? Maybe that was it. The truthmaker, for all its power, could be easily tripped up by semantics. Jacqueline could have only been talking about the potions here, in the box; perhaps that's all that Penelope needed.

"Excuse me," Emily said, her heart beating fast. She didn't like making enemies, especially not of friends, but she was a council witch now, and this trial wasn't just about her friendship with the accused.

Terpsichore looked at her. "Yes?"

Emily cleared her throat as she held her tablet up, pointing to the

meeting notes she was keeping. "Jackie, you asked 'are they all from the same batch'—could you be more specific?"

Jacqueline blinked. "Oh!" she said as realization dawned on her, "of course. Penelope, the potions here and back at your lab, are they all from the same batch?"

Emily returned her full attention to her notes. She could feel the heat of Penny's gaze on her.

"No." Penelope's answer was soaked in scorn.

"Is that right?" Terpsichore asked, her voice a bright sunny day.

Penelope was straining not to answer. She squinted her eyes shut, visibly searching for a way out. "One of the potions in my lab!" she finally blurted out. "It's... it's from Emilynn's batch!" She sat there for a moment, then gritted her teeth. She made a fist with her hand and slammed it down onto her thigh.

"Oh, are they different?" Jacqueline asked, her curiosity piqued.

"I... I made that one just for her," the alchemist answered, resigned to this line of questioning, color draining from her face.

"Ooh! A custom order!" the dark-haired witch said. "What's special about that batch?"

Emily dared to look up again. Penelope wasn't mad anymore. Rather, she looked... uncomfortable. There was sadness in her eyes.

"The..." she began to say, the gem at her neck starting to glow. Her eyes went wide as she visibly fought it, looking left and right, seemingly searching for her words. "The ones you're holding, they..." She took a deep breath, looking to the side, at no one in particular. "The ones here are my usual formula." Again the gem began to glow; she strained momentarily, then spoke again to let the words out. "They weren't made to—"

The doorbell rang.

6

"Oh gosh, sorry I'm late everyone!" Amanda said as she entered the council house and took off her hat, hurrying toward the meeting area. "I figured I'd pass by Penny's place and come here together, but she wasn't there, so I looked every—oh, you're here already."

"Hey Mandy," Penelope said, putting one arm over the back of her chair as she turned to her younger sister.

"Figures you'd be on time, haha!" Amanda said as she walked over.

"You could've texted me or something."

"I did!" the younger witch said, taking off her jacket and placing it on one of the remaining free seats. "Several times! You weren't answering calls, either!"

Penelope frowned, bringing up her phone. "Huh. Guess I left it on airplane mode."

Emily could tell Amanda was frazzled; poor thing didn't like being late to things, it put her on the back foot. Time for a diversion: something to shift the focus away from her so she could sit down and the proceedings could, well, proceed. She leaned on her podium with one hand, putting the other on her hip. "Airplane mode? Penny, what have you been looking at all this time?"

The alchemist quickly put her phone away. But not quickly enough to prevent others from getting a peek.

"Oh my gosh, are you playing it too?!" Amanda said with astonishment. "I've been saving up my pulls for the big beach event, we should totally trade outfit par—"

"JACKIE, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" Mildred shouted, making everyone else jump in surprise and turn toward the aging academic pair of witches.

Jacqueline was drinking one of Penelope's demon potions.

Emily blinked. Once, twice. This was really happening.

"Don't you 'nevermind' me!" Mildred said to her colleague's dismissing hand gestures. "Stop drinking that, it's dangerous! Stop!!"

Jacqueline didn't stop. "Ahhh," the dark-haired witch said as she stoppered the empty bottle and put it back down. "What?" she said after a moment as she looked up at everyone's stunned looks. "It's fine! Keep going, keep going."

"What do you mean it's fine?!" Mildred said, gripping the armrest separating her and Jacqueline. "This is dangerous magic! It's the entire reason we're here! My goodness, Jackie, what's gotten into you?!"

"This potion," she answered with a smirk as she gently covered

Mildred's hands with her own. "Milly, it's fine, like I said! I'm surrounded by a bunch of very competent witches, in a safe environment, with a ton of equipment and reagents a few doors away... I could hardly ask for better test conditions."

"Honestly Jackie," Terpsichore said, shaking her head. "You could've waited. Given us a bit of advance notice."

"Yes! This is reckless, even for you!" Mildred added.

"Waited for what, Cora?" Jacqueline asked. "For you to feed everything to the furnace?"

Terpsichore crossed her arms and pursed her lips. Over by the stairs, the lizard demon perked her head up and chuffed inquisitively, a dark puff of smoke seeping out of her nostrils.

Jacqueline leaned back with her arms behind her head and smiled. "The way I figure? This saves Emily a lot of paperwork, my research doesn't depend on this trial's outcome, and Milly gets a proper academic perspective on the process, just like she wanted."

Mildred sighed with frustrated affection. "Jackie, you know I didn't mean it like this."

"It'll be fine!" Jacqueline said. "Now, don't let me hold you all up. Where were we?"

"You, uh..." Penelope said, still staring at Jacqueline in disbelief. "You should probably hold on to something. It's got a bit of a kick."

"Oho!" the dark-haired witch said with a grin as she sat up straight. "Looking forward to it."

It took a while for Emily to realize an awkward silence had set in, one that she'd have to break. She jolted upright, running on autopilot as she tapped through her notes again. "So, uh, everyone ready to resume?" she said, eyes darting back to Jacqueline every few seconds, waiting for the potion to take effect. It was taking a while, but then again the elder academic had been at the forefront of magic research all her life; maybe she'd built up a bit of a tolerance.

"Yes, back to the matter at hand," Terpsichore said as she took a sip of tea. But alas, her cup was empty. "Could someone put another kettle on?" she asked, gently flicking the teacup back into the kitchen as it floated on an invisible cloud.

"I'll do it," Avignon said as they headed for the kitchen.

Emily stared at the minutes, looking at the words, her mind failing to read them. This trial had already been a lot. What *had* they been talking about?

Oh. Right. The potions. The two batches.

"So," Emily began, "Penny, you were saying about the different potion bat—"

"WHOO!" Jackie said as she shrank in her seat. "You weren't kidding! Ohh, I see how you do it now, you isolated the demonic essence until

the layered containment is done building—that *is* clever! Very nice, very safe.”

“I don’t like taking chances,” Penelope said as she snuck a careful sidelong glance at Jacqueline while making a show of looking at her phone.

Mildred, meanwhile, held her blanket up like a curtain over Jacqueline’s seat, presumably to offer some additional privacy. “What am I going to tell the school?” she asked, looking down at her colleague. “I do apologize, but your head researcher is currently a mou—” She paused. “Hm. No, not a mouse, more of a... Oh Penelope? How different is this batch? Are you sure this is even the same potion?”

“It’s not...” Penelope sighed. “It’s not a mouse potion, it’s a *demon* potion.”

“But it has to be demon *something*, doesn’t it?” Mildred asked.

“No it doesn’t,” Penelope said as she massaged the bridge of her nose. “Listen, this isn’t some direct corruption, it’s pure essence. Raw demon isn’t a *thing*, it’s a *template*. It affects different people in different ways. Emilyynn’s demon form turned out to be a mouse. Jacqueline’s is... well, I guess we’ll see.”

Mildred stared at Penelope. “How do you know all these things? Did...” She briefly looked back at the pile of familiars on the windowsill. “Did *she* tell you this? I certainly didn’t teach it. Nor is anyone I know researching demonic corruption on acc—”

“Yeah well maybe they should!” the alchemist said, sitting up straight. “If they did, they’d learn a few things!”

“—on account of how dangerous it is!” Mildred finished.

“Like I said,” Penelope replied, leaning back into her seat again, “I don’t like taking chances. I take plenty of precautions, I have backup safety measures, I set up redundant barriers, I don’t let anything slip through the cracks. I haven’t made a mistake yet.” The gem glowed; she struggled, then added, “Until now.”

Amanda let out a bittersweet chuckle as she finally sat down. “Em is pretty good at slipping through the cracks.”

“Huh,” Emily said. She hadn’t met Emilyynn before the potion incident, but from what she knew now, this was all was strangely fitting. “She really is a mouse.”

“That’s how it works,” Penelope said, eager to change the subject. “You can’t predict what kind of demon you’ll turn into, but it always makes some kind of sense.”

“It’s otherworld exposure in a bottle,” Terpsichore said, lost in thought.

All eyes turned to the head of the council. She took a sip of the small cup Avignon had brought her before they went back to their seat.

“Yeah,” Penelope said, looking up at the silver-haired witch. “Except

my way's safer. No emotional shock. People stay who they are inside. It's even reversible, *if you follow directions.*"

"How many have tried your potion?" Terpsichore asked.

Penelope's lips stayed shut, but not for long. The gem glowed as she answered, "Marcy and a couple of her friends. She visits from time to time."

"Of course," Terpsichore said before taking another sip. "Figures she'd be part of this."

"She helped me test it," the alchemist said, frowning. "That's it. Keep her out of it."

Emily looked back to Jacqueline, who'd gone silent. Mildred was still keeping an eye on her, thankfully.

Terpsichore put down her cup, not breaking eye contact. "Mm. Tell me, what did she turn into? Was it a... bat?"

Penelope smirked. "Close. Just the wings; the rest of her is a snake."

"And how about you?" Terpsichore asked, hardly able to conceal her interest.

The alchemist shrugged. "I don't know, I never drank it."

A moment. Two. The gem refused to glow.

Terpsichore visibly deflated. "Pity," she said, flicking her cup back to the kitchen once more.

"Wait," Emily said, looking up wide-eyed from copious transcribing. "Penny, you didn't try it? Not even once?"

"No," Penelope said with a taken-aback frown. "Of course not. Someone's got to be there if things go wrong. Which they didn't." The gem glowed again. "Until now," the alchemist repeated through gritted teeth.

"I had no idea you were doing all this," Amanda said. "Penny, you could've told me. I could've helped!"

"I was going to!" Penelope replied. "I had a plan. Let you get your own familiar, give it a year or two, and..." She trailed off.

Terpsichore looked at Amanda thoughtfully. Emily did the same, leaning on her podium with one arm.

"What do you figure, dear?" the silver-haired witch asked.

"Something excitable," Emily answered. "Energetic."

Amanda suddenly realized what was happening. "W-wait," she said, looking at the two witches sizing her up. Looking at the potions. Looking back again. "Are you asking what I'd...?"

Emily tried to contain her smile. "I'm figuring something like a b—"

"Ooh! How about me?" a small voice asked from within the pile of clothes that now occupied Jacqueline's seat. "What am I? Tell me!"

Mildred stared wide-eyed at her colleague digging herself out. "Jackie! Jackie are you okay? You're, uh... ah..."

"Whoo, everything's spinning," Jacqueline said cheerfully. A pair of

paws rose up out of the heaped fabric. "Help me up!"

Mildred reached in and picked her colleague up, flustered beyond belief. "You're a... cat?"

Jacqueline was now much smaller and covered in dark fur, with light golden splotches matching where her vitiligo spots had originally been. Her triangular ears twitched excitedly, as if trying to size up the room. Mildred attempted to lift her out of her clothes, but her body stretched down into the pile still.

"Oh definitely a cat," Emily said, blinking several times. "This is wild."

"A cat? Hah!" Jacqueline said as she held onto Mildred's hands with her paws. "Figures."

For a moment, everyone was too stunned to move.

Then Mildred huffed and stood up, giving her colleague a solid hoist... but still Jacqueline's body kept going. "Uhh," she said.

"Uhh," Jacqueline echoed, looking down. "How far do I go? Oh wait, there it is!" She got a solid grip on Mildred's hands, gave her elongated body a few powerful wriggles, and finally broke free of her fabric prison. She swung up into the air... and softly floated there, swimming as if in water, slowly making her way down as her tired colleague sat back down.

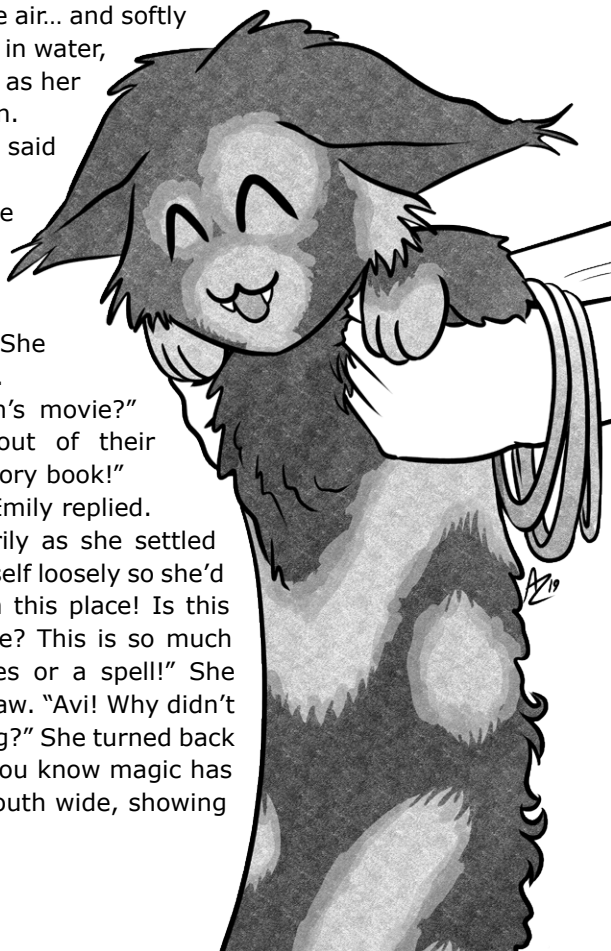
"A... dragon cat?" Emily said in utter disbelief.

The demon laying on the heating vent by the stairs perked up. Unlike her, Jacqueline lacked scales, wings, a lizard-like snout... She tilted her head, unconvinced.

"Oh, like in the children's movie?" Avignon asked, snapping out of their astonishment. "About that story book!"

"Yeah! Kinda like that!" Emily replied.

Jacqueline laughed merrily as she settled into Mildred's lap, coiling herself loosely so she'd fit. "Look at all the magic in this place! Is this how demons see all the time? This is so much better than a pair of glasses or a spell!" She waved past Avignon with a paw. "Avi! Why didn't you tell us Dentelle was so big?" She turned back to Mildred. "Milly, Milly, did you know magic has a taste?" She opened her mouth wide, showing off tiny little fangs.



Her colleague was at a loss for words, holding her hands up as if afraid to touch the witch-turned-demon.

"It's okay, Milly! I won't bite," Jacqueline said with glee.

Amanda stared at the transformed elder witch, mouth agape, seemingly trying to find the words. "Hey, um," she finally said.

"What's up?" Emily asked.

"How come..." the young witch began to say, transfixed by Jacqueline's current state, "how come she can talk?"

Penelope looked up from her phone, wide-eyed.

"What do you mean?" Emily said. "Why wouldn't she be able to?"

"The curriculum must have covered this back then, I'm sure," Mildred said, raising an eyebrow. She looked down at the colleague in her lap. "Though I imagine speech works a little differently in this, ah, shape... especially if you're used to something else." She made a grand gesture, slipping back into her classroom habits. "You see, demons are natural communicators. Even Brimstone picked it up rather quickly, and he was ancient by the time I summoned him."

"Yeah! It's tricky, but not really a problem," Jacqueline said. "Then again, I'm pretty chatty," she added with a satisfied smile.

"Emilynn can't talk," Amanda said as she looked at the box of potions, lost in thought. "Not when she's small. And when she's bigger, she still has trouble with it. Even after all these months."

Emily looked at the alchemist; Penelope was visibly sweating, her hand clutching the gem on the collar around her neck. She looked as out of sorts as she did right before Amanda showed up.

"Is that so?" Terpsichore said, turning her attention to Penelope. "Penny? Why is that?"

Penelope stared at the silver-haired witch, her breath catching in her throat. She swallowed hard.

The gem hanging from the collar around her neck began to glow.

"It wasn't supposed to be permanent!" Penelope yelled, pacing frantically. "If she'd just followed directions, it would've gone away with everything else!"

"You... you didn't want Emilyynn to tell me the truth," Amanda said, her face heartbreakingly devoid of emotion. "No matter what."

"You know how serious it is to misrepresent what magic does, Penelope," Terpsichore said as she leaned back in her chair and steepled her fingers. "That part wasn't in your contract."

"Yes it *was*!" Penelope replied, standing her ground. "Yes it was. I even made sure she read it. Article one, *you cannot let anyone know about any of this.*"

The head of the witches council narrowed her eyes. "That's my Penny. Always so clever."

Emily snorted. "I'm sorry, what? That doesn't count as a lie?"

Penelope shook her head. "It's not an *instruction*, it's a *description*. It doesn't mean you shouldn't, it means you won't be able to. It's..." The alchemist hesitated as if the sentence in her mouth had just turned sour. "It's not a lie if they misinterpret the truth."

"That's still dishonest!" Emily said. She sighed and shook her head. "Penny, square things away with your conscience however you like, but you putting that kind of crap in a *contract*? With someone who doesn't know anything about magic? That's just..." Emily crossed her arms and focused all her disapproval into a single glare. "You're supposed to be better than this."

Penelope sat back down, escaping everyone else's eyes by staring at her phone.

"If it's just the effect of a potion," Amanda said quietly, "then you can dispel it, can't you?"

The alchemist sighed. "Potions and demons don't really agree. But that's not the problem here. Remember that big talk we had forever ago about true names and cosmetic layers? Well, demons have a lot less leeway than we do. Fewer layers, but they make up for it by being able to evolve. Their bodies don't change; they get new ones instead."

"Well, what's the problem then?" Amanda said as she stood up, pacing nervously in Penelope's footsteps. "Can't Em just... evolve out of it?"

"She already did," Penelope replied.

Amanda stopped in her tracks.

"When she broke the containment of my potion," Penelope continued,

"it must have 'set' her base form. It sounds like she regained a lot of speech through her other forms, and if she ever evolves again, she can keep getting better, but... it won't change her starting point." She escaped into her phone again. "That's who she is now."

Amanda sat back down.

"I'm..." Penelope began. She took a deep breath. And another. "I'm sorry," she said quietly.

"I mean, we have a pact, so I can understand what she means when she squeaks. And even beyond that, she's very expressive in other ways, you know? But that's just how I see it. I'm her witch, I'm not her." Amanda looked up at her sister. "It's not me you should be apologizing to."

Emily silently reviewed the minutes she'd been taking as she processed the discussion. She didn't know Emilynn all that well, but... she felt for her. "Is that really how evolution works?" she asked Mildred, finally breaking the silence.

The academic witch pursed her lips. "I really wish that term hadn't caught on, it's not at all an accurate way to..." she said before catching herself. She nodded. "For the most part, yes. Given how unique each demon is, and how differently they interact with magic, there's a lot we still don't know." She shot the alchemist a look. "Penelope's personal research notwithstanding."

"Where *did* you pick up this fascination with demons and true names?" Terpsichore asked.

"Marcy got me into making affirmation potions back in school, and doing some basic research to improve the formula just brought up a lot of questions." Penelope crossed her arms. "I dunno. It was interesting, and not a lot had been written on the topic, so..."

"Because it's dangerous!" Mildred said. "Is that what you did straight after graduating? Start a business and jump right into forbidden magic?"

"Milly dear," Terpsichore interjected, "we don't forbid, we counsel. Remember?"

"Hmph. Not all counsel is good." Mildred narrowed her eyes at Penelope. "*She* put you up to this, didn't she? After we said not to—"

"Are you talking about me~?" Esmeralda asked, perched on the back of Mildred's chair.

"AAAAAA!" the elder witch screamed, reaching back to cover her head.

"Hey Esmeralda!" Jacqueline said as she tilted her head back to make eye contact with Penelope's familiar.

"Jacqueline," the large black cat said in greeting. "Taking inspiration from my style now? I'm flattered," she added with a cheshire grin.

"I put my own spin on it," the witch-turned-demon replied with a self-satisfied smile.

"Hello, Esmeralda," Terpsichore said a little louder than she needed to. The elder witch sat up straight in her chair, taking on a more official tone. "Glad you could join us. Now, I know we've discussed this on and off over the years, but given that we are on the record at the moment... Is what Mildred said just now true?"

Esmeralda hopped off of Mildred's chair and made her way to Penelope's side. "Come now Cora," she said along the way, "you know the answer to that as well as I do."

"Humor me," the elder witch said. "Or rather, humor Emily, who's keeping the minutes."

The large demon cat smiled as she hopped up onto Penelope's lap. "Oh, when it comes to getting this one to follow orders, there are people far more skilled than I am—especially in this room," she said as she curled up. Emily couldn't quite place the expression she saw on Penelope's face, but the look she shot Esmeralda would have turned a lesser familiar to stone. "It just so happens that I find her passion projects interesting enough to nourish. It takes a lot of my magic to keep everything running, you know. "

"No one put me up to this," Penelope said after regaining her composure. "I saw an opportunity to break new ground and I took it." The gem glowed again. "I just wanted to leave my mark," she added quietly. She slipped one arm under Esmeralda's front half and held her familiar close as she scratched her behind the ears with the other.

A half-comfortable silence hung over the room.

"Hey," Amanda finally said, seemingly transfixed by a random spot on the floor, "what happens now?"

The council witches gave each other somber looks, visibly unsure how to answer.

"What happens with Emily?" Amanda asked, looking up to Terpsichore.

The elder witch instantly softened. "Oh! Well she does whatever she wants, my dear."

"Were you worried about that?" Emily asked, looking from Amanda to Penelope and back again. "Did you think we were here because...?"

"No, no!" Amanda said hurriedly, "I mean, I know why we're here, it's just... I realize now that I never really brought her up with you all, and with everything that happened, I just thought..." The young witch took a deep breath.

"Don't worry Amanda, she's lovely," Avignon said as they returned from the kitchenette with an apple. They held it up to their shoulder, where it rose gently into the air; parts of it began to disappear, bitten off into nothingness.

"Everyone loves her, dear," Terpsichore said. "We were talking about her the whole way back."

"She's... surprisingly happy," Mildred said as she began to regain her composure. "She's well-behaved, she seems to be genuinely enjoying her work... And she's showing no classic signs of corruption. So long as she's cared for, I don't see a problem here."

"I'll care for her!" Amanda said, balling her hands up into fists. "I'll go on the record, okay? I'll always be there for her. She means the world to me."

Terpsichore smiled. "We don't doubt you for a moment, dear." She turned to Emily. "That said, we should add her to the list, shouldn't we? Just in case."

Emily nodded, tapping away at her tablet. "Yeah, of course!"

"The list?" Amanda asked.

"Of protected familiars, dear," Mildred said. "The council house is home to important magical resources, not the least of which are familiars who have become part of the community. And as familiars need pacts to stay here, we do try to play matchmaker, and leave ourselves available."

"That's right!" Jacqueline said, sitting up as best she could given her current form. She looked up at Mildred with a playful smirk. "Speaking of which, Milly..."

"Wh—JACKIE! You are not... Don't even joke about this!" She looked down at her colleague. "You are not making a pact. You don't even need—" She turned to Penelope. "She doesn't need a pact to stay, does she? She's not going to vanish into the otherworld, is she??"

Penelope shook her head. "No, she's not. She's fine. The containment keeps her human and demon sides separate and intact; she's as much part of this world as the other." She idly ran her hand through Esmeralda's floof. "Hm."

"See?" Mildred said. "I'm getting you a dispel potion as soon as we're done here and we can stop this silliness."

"C'mon Milly," Jacqueline said, giving her elongated body a few experimental wiggles, "aren't you the least bit curious about this? By Penny's calculations we have a couple months, easy—think of the breakthroughs! The trails we can blaze in demonic research!" She grinned, eyes practically sparkling. "Think of the papers we can write!"

Mildred shook an admonishing finger at her colleague. "*Jackie*."

Jacqueline looked at her counterpart's finger, then leaned forward and touched the tip with her nose. "Boop."

Mildred was too dumbfounded to reply.

"Is that true for Em too, Penny?" Amanda asked.

Penelope turned to her sister. She stayed silent for a moment. "There's nothing to contain anymore," she said. "As far as magic is concerned, Emily's a demon. She needs a pact to stay here."

Amanda took a deep breath, then nodded. "I meant what I said. I'll take care of her."

"You should probably tell her about this," Emily said to Amanda. "She's not magically trained, right? There's a lot of important stuff she needs to know."

Amanda nodded again. "Of course."

"Make sure she knows she has a home here," Terpsichore added. "No matter what happens. That's what we're here for."

Amanda kept nodding. "Yeah." Another deep breath. "I'll make sure she understands. I'll tell her everything."

"Everything?" Penelope asked.

The young witch looked to her sister. Their eyes met for a tense moment.

"Listen, Mandy," the alchemist said, looking off to the side. "Let me tell her about the... the talking thing, alright? That's my responsibility. She should hear it from me."

There was a brief pause. "Okay," Amanda said with a small nod.

"I'll have a talk next time we're alone. Until then..." Penelope returned her attention to the familiar in her lap. "Just give her the good news. I'll give her the bad."

Amanda chuckled bittersweetly. "Like old times, huh?"

Penelope smirked. "Heh, yeah. Except your girlfriend's probably more understanding than mom and dad."

The sisters shared an uneasy smile.

"Well," Emily said, standing back up to her full height, "if everyone's done, I think we have just one more thing left on the docket for today."

Penelope's face returned to its usual mask of weary resolve. She sat up with her back straight. As if on cue, Esmeralda gently climbed up one shoulder and partway down the other, draping herself around the alchemist's shoulders like a jet-black boa.

"Let's go then," Penelope said as she locked eyes with Terpsichore. "Time to end this."



8

"Demonic corruption of a third party, willful misrepresentation of a magical effect... is that everything?" Emily asked, listing off the charges.

"Endangerment," Mildred added. "Poor Emilynn needs a pact at all times now." The elder witch turned to Jacqueline, still haphazardly curled up in her lap. "Can you imagine what it'd be like to end up in the otherworld? Not knowing anyone there?" With every sentence, she leaned closer to her colleague. "With no way to get back? A fish out of water?"

Jacqueline licked her lips. "Ooh, fish. That sounds pretty good right about now."

"Jackie, this is no time for jokes!" Mildred said, exasperated. "This is a real danger! Can't you—"

"ENOUGH!" Penelope yelled out. With Esmeralda still wrapped around her shoulders like a thick, dark fog of undulating fur, the alchemist's imposing presence was hard to ignore.

Mildred looked up, wide-eyed. Before she could reply in a huff, she noticed Amanda, off to the side; she was at the verge of tears, barely keeping it together.

"She's freaked out enough already," Penelope said. "And besides, I'll take care of it, alright? If Em needs to hear bad news, I'll tell her the bad news. If she gets lost, I'll summon her back—like I did once already. And if she needs a pact, I'll take care of her." Esmeralda peeked her head up at this; Penelope quickly lifted a hand to scratch her head in appeasement. "I mean I'll find her someone," she added quietly.

"That's not gonna be necessary," Amanda said, regaining her composure. "She's my familiar, and she's the best, and we're a team, and I love her. I'm not gonna let her go, okay? She can count on me."

"Okay," Penelope said. "I just mean..." She sighed. "I got her into this, alright? It's my mess to clean up, my responsibility. I can take care of it."

Amanda pointed to her sister and opened her mouth—

"If you need me to," Penelope quickly amended.

Amanda backed down. "Okay," she said.

"Okay," Emily repeated, trying to get the trial back on track. This was visibly demanding on everyone and she knew if she didn't get things squared away quickly, the whole thing would need to go on for another day. And that's something she desperately wanted to spare Amanda and Emilynn—and Penelope too, she supposed. "Now, you can't really have demonic corruption without endangerment, so let's just say that's

already part of the charges. Anything else?"

"Lying to her sister," Amanda said.

"What?" Emily and Penelope replied in unison.

"You just admitted it: 'like I did once already,' right? I *knew* that was you back at the Summoning Circle," Amanda told her sister. "That summoning was way too easy. My spell didn't even do anything, did it?"

Penelope rubbed the bridge of her nose. "It did... *something*. It summoned Em from my lab. That still counts."

"Not for a lot," Amanda said with a slight pout.

Penelope shook her head in disbelief. "Seriously, Mandy? *This* is what you're focusing on?"

Amanda tried to maintain eye contact with her sister, but looked away after a few seconds.

Emily tried to grab back the reins of the conversation. "I... I mean, lying is bad, yes, but in the context of this trial, I'm not sure this counts as a..." she began to say, then trailed off. "Tell you what, I'll include it under misrepresentation of magic. Sounds like Penny's been doing that a lot lately."

"Fine," Penelope said. "Fine!" she shouted, slamming her hands down on her knees. "Just get on with it. Close the shop, throw me out of town. It's what you want to do, isn't it?"

The gathered witches stared back, a council of frowns.

"What *do* we want to do?" Avignon asked, walking in from the kitchenette with a fresh kettle of tea. "We could certainly do that, the exile. But Penny Pots is known here, it has a reputation. Lots of customers, yes?"

Penelope nodded curtly.

"Penny Pots is about more than just business!" Amanda said, her voice shaking.

Her outburst was met with surprised silence.

"Penny's store helps a ton of people," the young witch continued as she stood tall, her tone growing in strength. "I wouldn't be here if not for it. Neither would a lot of my friends." She took a deep breath. "No, that's not giving ourselves enough credit... Look, most of us would've probably figured things out either way, or gotten help elsewhere, but my sister and her store saved us a lot of time. Penny Pots has always been there for us when we needed a nudge in the right direction. Sometimes you just want to change for a bit, you know? To see if it fits better. That's important." Amanda leaned down to look at the floor, face red and out of breath.

"That *is* important." Avignon said, turning to Penelope. "It is your store, you built it, you grew it, the community grew it also." Avignon said as they paced around the room, stopping next to Terpsichore. "Could someone else take it?"

The silver-haired witch held out her empty cup. "What about that Leslie, ah..."

Avignon paused with the kettle, waiting for Terpsichore to finish her sentence.

The witch waved her empty cup side to side, trying to find the right word. "...graduate student?" she finally said.

Avignon poured her some tea.

"They've been helping you out at festivals, haven't they?" Terpsichore continued. "I think I've seen them at the evening alchemy classes."

"Leslie's not ready," Penelope said flatly. "They're great with customers, but even with classes and my tutoring, it'll take a while longer before I give them a key to the lab."

"Think they'll get there?" Emily asked.

"Oh yeah," Penelope answered immediately.

Emily nodded with a slight smile.

"Then it is simple," Avignon said with a shrug, filling more cups for their colleagues.

"I suppose so," Terpsichore said, taking a sip as she turned back to the accused witch.

"...What?" Penelope asked after a tense silence.



AZ



"The community still benefits from Penny Pots, and there's no Penny Pots without Penny, at least for the moment," the head of the witches council said. "Seems rather clear-cut to me."

The alchemist looked back incredulously. "What, that's it? You're not shutting me down?"

Terpsichore chuckled. "Penny, my dear, the council isn't here to cast out everyone who makes mistakes. It's a last resort when all other solutions have been ruled out. We have a community to foster and grow, after all; sometimes the pruning shear is not as effective as the judicious use of fertilizer."

"Hm," Penelope said, mulling the words over. She looked up at Terpsichore again. "So you're not gonna try to prune me then?" she asked with a faint grin.

Terpsichore smirked back. "No, my dear Penny, I think cooling your heels in fertilizer will do you some good."

"Har, har," Penelope said as she leaned back, the tension visibly leaving her body. Esmeralda rode the drooping shoulders down, pouring herself back into the alchemist's lap.

"Well then," the familiar said in a comforting whisper as she curled up into her usual ball of floof. "That's not the end of the world, is it?"

The witch instinctively ran her hands through her familiar's fur, staring at the ceiling.

Amanda let out a long sigh and leaned back as well. Meanwhile, the witches of the council straightened up, reaching for their things.

"I think that's plenty for today," Mildred said. "Now Jackie, sit tight and I'll get you that disp—"

"Wait, what?" Penelope said. "What's going to happen? We're just stopping here?"

"We can settle the rest tomorrow," Terpsichore said. "Or rather, the day after. Tomorrow's a school meeting day."

"Oh the day after tomorrow's no good for me," Mildred said. "Previous engagement."

The two sisters visibly tensed up. The council witches talked about further and further dates as they all got up.

"Wait wait, hold on!" Emily said loudly, gesturing emphatically for everyone to stay seated. "We're almost done, aren't we?" the young council member said, eyeing Amanda and Penelope. "We can make a partial ruling now and figure out the nitty-gritty later on our own. You know, let Penny and Mandy get on with their stuff until then. Keep Penny Pots running. Right?"

The other council members exchanged looks.

"A partial ruling?" the silver-haired witch asked. She turned to Penelope. "Are you fine with that, Penny?"

The alchemist nodded. "Yes! Fine! I just want to get back to work."

"Partial ruling it is, then," Terpsichore said as she sat back down. "But let's make it quick."

Amanda and Penelope let out a sigh of relief.

"Absolutely," Emily said as she tapped away at her tablet furiously. "So, Cora, metaphors are great and all, but what do you mean by fertilizer?"

"Oh, you know," Terpsichore said as she gestured with a hand, "it all boils down to not letting this happen again, correct? We need assurances of goodwill; Penny needs to show trustworthiness. And there's the matter of damages, too. I imagine we can put a price on the latter. As for the rest, we can assign a chaperone and work out suitable community service."

Every word the head of the witches council said made Penelope slip lower and lower in her chair; by the end of the sentence, she was practically lying down. For someone who wasn't a fan of red tape, she was going to have a bad time.

"Okay," Emily said as she took down some rapid notes with one hand, putting on her hat with the other.

The other council witches did the same. Except for Jacqueline, who seemed to be looking around for hers.

"Settle down, Jackie," Mildred chided. "You can abstain just this once. Besides, how would you put it on? You can practically fit inside it now."

"Uh, should we put our hats on too?" Amanda asked.

"Oh, I think that would be appropriate," Terpsichore replied. "You were involved in the trial."

Penelope looked down, one hand petting Esmeralda, the other holding her phone.

"You too, Penny," Terpsichore added.

"Didn't bring it," Penelope said with a dramatic shrug. "Ah well."

"Here it is!" Amanda said a little too cheerfully, reaching into her hat and pulling a larger one out of it with a flourish. She handed the aging piece of patchwork fabric to Penelope, the tip making a fair effort at staying up before finally drooping from wear.

Penelope took it incredulously. "How... where did you find it?" she asked.

"I said I went to look for you at Penny Pots, didn't I?" the younger sister said with a victorious smile. "It was in its usual spot; I figured you'd forgotten it. Like you always do."

The alchemist gingerly placed the hat on her head. "Thanks," she muttered through gritted teeth, trying not to look at whatever expression of self-satisfaction Terpsichore was sending her way.

Emily went over what she'd just written, then raised her hand. "Okay. Shall we say, motion to let Penelope continue operating her store

provisionally with the understanding that the council shall determine appropriate sanctions at a future date?" She looked to her colleagues, then inhaled sharply. "I can issue the motion in this case, right? Since I didn't call the one for the trial."

Terpsichore waved away her worries. "Absolutely, dear."

Avignon raised a hand. "Seconded."

Emily nodded with some relief. "Okay! All in favor?"

Enough witches (minus Terpsichore, who recused herself) raised their hand for the motion to pass; Emily barely had time to tabulate the votes before Avignon was out the door and Mildred was off to the restroom.

"Motion passes!" Emily said, leaning down on her podium with a heavy sigh. "Whew."

9

"So it makes you tell the truth, huh?" Amanda asked as she took a closer look at the collar around Penelope's neck.

"Sort of," her older sister answered. "It doesn't *make* you, but... it kinda makes it irresistible. Same difference."

Amanda squinted at it. "But you can talk around it."

"Well yeah," Penelope said as the gem began to glow, "w-with enough practice." She coughed, turning away from her sister as she fumbled for her phone. "Anyway let's get going, yeah? We both have shops to go back to. And a girlfriend." She paused, then turned back around. "I mean, just you," she quickly added, lightly flustered. "*You* have a girlfriend. "

"I have a girlfriend," Esmeralda said, stretching her paws.

Penelope slowly turned to stare at the catlike demon. "What."

"Someone should call that lovely little restaurant across the street and get Em and I a table," she said with a cheshire grin, sitting up from her spot on the chair Penelope had vacated. "One of the little ones they keep for familiars, but for two this time."

Amanda stared, mouth agape. "Oh my gosh," she said, "that's so cute!" She beamed. "I'm so happy for you two!"

Penelope blinked several times. "Sure. Yeah. Alright. Whatever," she said, turning around one more time. "Where's Cora? I can't wait to get out of this thing." She pulled her hair aside, exposing the truthmaker's clasp.

"Oh, I can do it," Amanda said, reaching for the collar.

"No, you can't," Penelope corrected. "Only the person who puts it on can take it off."

Amanda pulled her hand back. "Oh wow, is that true? That's... huh." She tilted her head. "That's... really..."

"Annoying, yeah," Penelope said. She looked at her sister. "Why are you being so helpful? I thought you'd still be mad at me."

Amanda looked back. "I don't know. I'm still all over the place. Today's been kind of a roller coaster, you know?" She let out a sigh. "I don't like staying mad at you. And I want to trust you again! So... I guess I'm working on it."

"Mm," Penelope said. She looked around the room, trying to find the words. "Listen, I'll make it up to you, alright?"

Amanda snuck a peek at the truthmaker. Nothing.

"I mean it," Penelope said. She stood there for a moment, then turned around. "I'll just... go have Cora take this thing off," she added

quietly.

"Oh, why don't you keep it for now," Terpsichore suggested as she continued looking over the minutes with Emily. Both of them had stopped trying not to eavesdrop on the sisters' conversation.

Penelope stopped in her tracks. "What."

"The trial's not over, is it?" the silver-haired witch said with a slight smile. "Might as well wait until final judgment."

The alchemist nearly exploded. "*Excuse me wh—*"

"Oh don't you worry, *I'll* know where it is," Terpsichore said, quickly shutting her down. "It's really no trouble at all." She shot a sidelong glance at Amanda, giving her a knowing smirk.

The young witch grinned, brightening up instantly.

Penelope just stared unblinking, her entire head looking like it was about to catch fire. "Fine," she finally said through gritted teeth as she turned to Amanda. "Whatever. Let's just go." She held out an arm for Esmeralda, who nimbly climbed back onto the alchemist's shoulders.

"Okay!" Amanda said cheerfully, heading for the door with a bounce in her step.

"Penny," Terpsichore called out as she walked over to where the alchemist had been sitting during the trial.

"What is it *now*," Penelope muttered, turning around.

"You're forgetting it again," the elder witch said, picking up the well-worn hat by the tip.

Penelope gave her a long look, regaining her composure. "I'm not," she finally said.

Terpsichore smirked, then with a wave of her hand, sent the hat twirling lazily through the air and into Penelope's arms. "It's your choice if you want to keep it this way until it falls apart, but you do have to keep it."

The alchemist visibly chewed on her words, rolling a few potential retorts around in her head. "Why?" she finally asked.

"Because it was a gift. Because it's important to us," Terpsichore said. She walked closer, looking down at Penelope with a slight smile. "But if you need additional motivation; because I'm telling you to."

Penelope locked eyes with the silver-haired witch. "Okay, answer me this. Why keep these things around? Why the hats? The robes? The whole rigamarole? We're scientists more than witches, aren't we? You were there when it started! Why go with the Halloween costumes?"

Terpsichore's smile softened and grew more maternal, if only for a moment. "Oh, Penny, there were witches long before I came around."

"Yeah, but their magic didn't work!" the alchemist said. "Ours does!"

The head of the witches council shook her head. "Penny, my dear Penny... Whose word do we have? The word of those who wrote the books, who laid down the kindling, who lit the spark?" Any hint of softness was

gone; there was now a different warmth in Terpsichore's eyes, one that smoldered and cracked and burned. "Our magic is real to you and me. But even now, we have to fight to make sure others see it, and give it the respect it deserves. My whole life I've worked to understand magic, but there's still so much we don't know. Who's to say it always worked like we know it does? Who's to say it didn't make miracles back then too? All we have are stories." Terpsichore took a measured breath. "And yes, stories shift and change every time they're told. But unlike a history book, a story can't be burned. It lives on. And it's up to us to make sure others get to hear it."

Penelope looked at the beat-up hat in her hands. Ran her fingers along the stitches.

"How long has the otherworld existed?" Terpsichore asked.

Penelope looked up and frowned. "How—"

"Longer than you or I have existed," Esmeralda answered, stirring from her spot around the alchemist's shoulders. She grinned wide. "It has seldom been as close to your world as it is now."

Penelope stared at her familiar, pensive.

"But what do I know?" Esmeralda said as she curled back up.

"When we cast a spell, we move magic along a path we know will get results," Terpsichore explained. "Not every motion we make during casting is essential; some are just there for support, to help guide us along." She put her hand on Penelope's shoulder, finding the one spot not completely overtaken by Esmeralda's jet-black fur. "As it is with the hats, and the costumes, and the terminology that Mildred finds so inaccurate. They're part of the ritual."

Penelope looked up into Terpsichore's eyes in a rare moment devoid of defiance.

"The ritual guides us, helps keep us grounded," the elder witch said as she took the hat back. "And that, my dear Penny, is vital."

Penelope stood there dumbfounded as Terpsichore gently put the hat back onto the alchemist's head, giving it a pat. The older witch gently lifted the younger's chin, tilting her head up to look into her eyes.

"That's why you have to keep the hat, pet," the silver-haired witch said, then walked away.



10

Emily brought the rest of the mugs into the kitchenette, placing them on the counter next to where Bern was busy cleaning the tea set. "You don't have to do this, you know," she said. "You didn't get to drink any of it."

"Last one in does the dishes," he said as he swirled some more water in the kettle. "I made the rule, s'only fair I follow it." He let the leftover leaves drift to a stop and stared at the resulting image for a quiet moment, then smiled. "Hmm."

She patted him on the shoulder. "Well, don't overwork yourself, alright? Goodness knows you've been putting in enough time at the Circle."

"Only as much as I can manage," Bern said as he dried his hands. "That's the beauty of owning your own business: you get to set your own hours." He scratched between his cornrows.

"You're still picking at it," Emily quipped as she batted his hand away. Or, at least, made a show of trying to; it would've taken ten of her to even have a chance of moving that arm.

"What?" Bern replied. "No."

"Like ten times since we started talking."

"Pff." Bern shook his head. "Once or twice, tops."

"Just try something else! If you end up scratching so much, maybe try a twist out?"

"Hmm." Bern started to reach up again before catching himself.

Emily looked at him for a moment. "You're really serious about growing it out, aren't you. Is this because of--"

"The man has taste!" Bern said, turning to face his younger colleague. "I said I'd give it a shot, I'm gonna give it a shot." He leaned against the counter. "So. How'd the trial go?"

"Decision pending," Emily said as she leaned next to him. "Penny keeps doing what she's doing, for now, but we'll probably figure out a way to keep her on the straight and narrow. I need to schedule another meeting for that."

Bern leaned in. "How do you figure it'll go?"

Emily tilted her head. "Everyone agrees she messed up. But she showed signs of growth, and that's important. Either way, she's not getting out of this without some community damages. She also hates paperwork, so Milly's gonna give her a bunch to do. And... yeah, she's gonna get a chaperone. Cora's insisting on that."

"Yeah? Jackie and Milly, as usual?" Bern asked.

"Milly would love to breathe down Penelope's neck, but Esmeralda's there, so that's gonna be a big no. I figure Jackie's gonna want to do it, though, considering... oh yeah, Jackie got into Penny's demon potions. She's a floating dragon cat now."

"Huh," Bern said. He scratched his chin, then nodded. "Yeah, figures."

Emily looked at her colleague, then at his hand, then back at him. "That's it, I am getting you some moisturizer. Anyway, Jackie's gonna want to ask Penny a ton of questions, and Esmeralda doesn't faze her at all, so that's good. But even then, Milly's gonna insist on having someone keep *her* out of trouble. So that means..."

Bern looked at Emily. He raised an eyebrow.

The young council member looked up at him with a grin. "Yup."

The large owner of the Summoning Circle gave a hearty chuckle, patting her on the back. "Your first field assignment! Yeah, you're gonna show 'em how it's done."

"Thanks," Emily said with a grin. "It's what I do!"

Fin.



SHORTER STORIES

A SUBSTITUTE FAMILIAR COLLECTION



BY ALEX ZANDRA VAN CHESTEIN

Tutor

"So," Terpsichore said as she closed the door to her office.

"So," Penelope said, eyes glued to her phone.

The headmistress walked past the student and sat down behind her desk. "I guess this is goodbye, then."

"Seems like it," Penelope replied. She looked up. "So what now? Gonna delay my diploma on a technicality? 'Recommend' I move halfway around the world to have me out of your hair?"

Terpsichore shook her head. "You know full well Marcy wanted that opportunity."

"I know that's what she *says*."

"And you should listen!" The head of the magic school sighed, moving some books around her desk. "Goodness, Penelope, if there's one thing I hope you learn as you set off on whatever reckless adventure you've got your eye on, it's to *listen*."

"Nah, I've had my fun. Or, well, whatever you wanna call this. Straight as an arrow from now on."

"Is that so?"

"Hey, I've got mouths to feed, alright? Besides, I passed with flying colors, that ought to get me something. I'll set up a potion stand somewhere, make some money, work my way up."

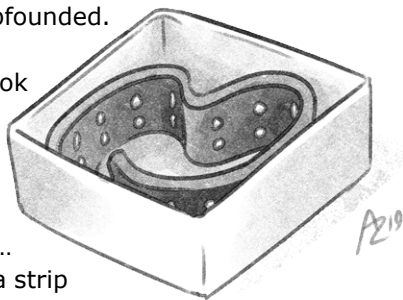
"Why Penny, that's... unusually restrained, coming from you."

"Yeah well I need the council's stamp of approval for anything bigger, don't I?" Penelope returned her gaze to her phone. "And we both know how that conversation's gonna go."

Terpsichore retrieved a box from under the clutter and blew away the dust that had accumulated here and there. "I think you're selling yourself short."

Penelope looked back up, dumbfounded. "What."

"I know how much of a shine you took to your craft. I know you can do great things when you apply yourself. I think you should aim higher. Besides, I'm not the whole council, am I? I'll likely have to recuse myself anyway, considering our... history." She opened the box, retrieving a strip of black studded leather with a clasp at the end.



Penelope smirked. "Hah, you kept it. Of course you kept it."

Terpsichore shrugged. "I like to keep interesting things close at

hand. I have to hand it to you, it was a very good attempt at a prank, as doomed as it was to fail."

The student leaned back in the guest chair, smiling at the ceiling. "Can't win 'em all." She shot a glance back at the collar. "I'm surprised you're even touching it."

"Oh the enchantment's long gone," Terpsichore said matter-of-factly, causing Penelope's mood to drop somewhat. "Containment fell apart in no time and the magic dissipated. But it was a very good enchantment while it lasted; I literally couldn't put it down."

Penelope crossed her arms. "Hm."

"But I see where you were going with it. And while compulsory clothing isn't exactly a marketable skill, Penny, you're practically bursting with talent. If you put half as much effort into anything else as you and Marcy put into your little pranks, you'll do amazing things. That's why you're here. I know what you're capable of, and it would be a shame for you to squander it."

Penelope frowned. "So that's what this is about? More homework?"

Terpsichore stood up. "Put together a proper business plan. Apply yourself. Marcy told me what kind of potions you've been brewing; lead with that! You can get more than a stand. You can get some room to grow."

Penelope got to her feet as well. "Wh—I'm an alchemist, not a business major!"

"Then all you need is some tutoring," Terpsichore said as she wrote on a piece of paper and placed it in the student's hand. "I can help with that."

Penelope's jaw went slack as she read the note. "You. You want me to visit for..."

Terpsichore nodded. "Just for this summer. You're a fast learner, I'm sure—"

The student picked up her bag and wordlessly walked to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"Don't you get it?" Penelope said as she balled up her hand into a fist around Terpsichore's note. "I graduated. I'm free! We're *both* free. We never have to see each other again after this! Isn't that what you wanted?"

Terpsichore gave her a stern look with all the sharp edges sanded down. She slid the piece of leather across her desk. "You're forgetting something."

"Keep it," Penelope said as she opened the door. "Do what you want with it. I don't care." And with that, she left the headmistress's office.

She was outside before she looked up again, teeth grinding, ears burning. She found a quiet spot up against the wall and finally let out the breath she'd been holding in for who knows how long.

Penelope looked up at the summer sky. Started releasing some of her pent-up tension. Opened her hand, and peered at the crumpled note.

She sighed, and swore under her breath. Started walking home. Picked up her phone, and started dialing.

Demand I

"You've reached Penny Pots!" Penelope answered with a cheerful tone as she picked up the phone.

"Mm? Hah, no, I don't sell girl potions," she said to the caller. "No, for real. It was... Well, not a prank, really, just..." She paced around the store, pushing a half-empty box into an open spot next to one of the shelves. They were already starting to get dusty.

"No, I know! Listen, I'm not joking around, it's just that it's not exactly what... Okay, well if that's what you want, I've got something similar. Yeah. Yeah, just come on down, I'll set you up." She hung up, pensive.

"Hm."

She paced around the store some more, trying not to look at all the unboxing she still had to do. Maybe she could rope her sister into helping out before school started. She smiled at the thought for a variety of reasons, at least one of them genuinely wholesome.

Penelope took a deep breath and walked over to her recipe book. "Maybe I should just go ahead and make some of the dang things at this point," she announced to no one in particular.

Service

The morning air was crisp, still carrying the scent of fresh bread from the bakery two doors down; there was a good chance of them having the good croissants at this hour. Barring that, they would surely have a number of acceptable pastries. They always did.

Across the street, a group of teenagers waited for the signal to cross the street.

There was construction ahead, but it had not spilled onto the sidewalk quite yet. It was likely to cause a slight convergence of foot traffic, however, which could prove troublesome. Thankfully, today the crowds were sparse.

Which left only the upcoming crossroads to consider. The two visible angles had no unknown variables, but the side street hidden by the coffee shop on the corner could hide any number of surprises.

Thankfully, Bel was ready.

The lady's well-being was at stake, after all.

"Phone," Ellie said quietly as she held up the vibrating metal rectangle.

Bel gently accepted the device, tucking it into the space between her ear and curled horn. "Hello! Please state your business," she said with a smile. The lady appreciated it when she was courteous.

She made a mental note of what the voice on the phone said as she guided the lady down the street, navigating through the gaps and positioning herself between Ellie and any pedestrians who came too close to her personal space.

"Of course," Bel responded, "simply let me know when would be a good time to return your call and I shall contact you with the details."

The crossroads were blessedly clear by the time the two of them arrived, but the pedestrian crossing light's timing was a little too close for comfort. They would have to wait for the next cycle. Unfortunately, this meant dealing with Bel's worst fear: an unwanted social approach, in the form of a gawking passerby who had burst forth from the coffee shop.

"Oh hey!" the human said as he ducked to peek under Ellie's hat, "are you, like, a witch or something?"

"Tomorrow is acceptable of course," Bel said to the caller as she inserted herself between the lady and the inquisitive pedestrian. She felt the lady's grip on her hand grow ever so tighter, a clear indication she would prefer some alone time.

"Whoaaa! Are you a *demon*?" the person asked, craning their neck to look up at the familiar before them. He reached up as if to touch one of her horns.

"I will make a mental note," Bel said to the caller as she lowered her head. "Would you prefer a call or an electronic message?"

"Wait," the person on the street said, "what are you—"

Bel gently but firmly pressed both curled horns to the pedestrian's chest and took a single decisive step forward, thrusting them back into the shop with a yelp. "And thank you as well," she said before hanging up and returning the lady's phone to her.

"Thanks Bellie," Ellie said as she returned her attention to her phone, following her familiar across the intersection.

Demand II

"Hey Marcy, it's me," Penelope said as she folded down an empty cardboard box. "Yeah! I mean yeah, technically. Door's unlocked, customers are buying things, I scribbled the hours down on a piece of

cardboard and taped it to the window. Does that count?" She threw the flattened box on top of the others. "Mm. Then yeah, store's open."

The alchemist walked back into the side room and picked a new empty cube to turn into a rectangle. "Yeah, the place is way bigger than I wanted, but I guess I'll make do. Location was just too good." She picked away at the tape. "Yeah, council, city, they're all good with it. The previous owners tore down the wall in-between both their places and everyone was saying it just felt wrong to split 'em apart again, so I dunno. I get almost double the space both in the store and in the apartment upstairs? I'm not gonna say no."

The pile of cardboard was growing, but more importantly, Penelope now had access to the back half of the side room again. She still wasn't sure what she was going to do with this part of the store, but for the moment she'd filled out the shelves with random things to make it look less empty. "Yeah? I dunno Marcy, I'm not a fast food place. Not sure people need to sit down to drink a potion. I mean there are a couple tables right here, I guess I could put down some reading material. Hm? Oh wow, really? They ask folks to sit down and chill for a bit afterwards? Yeah, like a vaccine. Is it just where you are, or...? Oh. Huh. I mean I have the space for a rest area, why not? Maybe this'll get the council to let me carry stronger stuff."

Penelope climbed the stairs, making a mental note to get a double of the key for Amanda soon. The second floor worked out well enough, giving her plenty of space to live in. She still hadn't decided what to do with the superfluous room, though. "How's it working out over there, by the way?" she asked as she paced along the large space, her footsteps echoing around her. "Oh nice! Hah, a whole town to yourself? You're gonna have 'em eating out of your hand."

She peeked into the guest bedroom. It wasn't exactly lived-in, but knowing that her sister was coming back to it that night made her smile, somehow. "You know what I mean! Dang, girl, no council, just you and a bunch of folks who only heard about magic from shows. That's gonna be a trip." She grinned. "Seriously, I'm happy for you! You better make the most of it."

"Anyway, the reason I'm calling... You wouldn't happen to have a recipe for a girl potion, would you?" She stepped over to her room and closed the door. "Yeah, it worked *so well* that word got around! Now I'm getting calls. People want it. And like, even after I tell them about the affirmation potions. Yeah, some of them just want to try it, I guess? New experiences and all that. Yeah."

Penelope sat down on the edge of her bed, kicked off her shoes, and let herself fall onto her back. "Thank god. Okay yes, please send that to me! Thanks Marcy, you're the best. Let me know next time you're in town, yeah?"

She smiled. "You too. Bye."

She let her phone fall onto the bed next to her and sprawled out on the covers. She'd closed her eyes for less than a minute when she heard the tell-tale sound of a new email. "Good ol' Marcy."

Penelope let herself relax for a couple of minutes, then sat back up and went to look over the recipe. "Give the people what they want, I guess."

Famous

Amanda's face lit up. "Oh my gosh, really?!" she said, almost spilling her coffee.

"Yes!" Leslie said, eyes a-sparkle. "She's going by Emily now!"

"Eeee, I'm so happy for her!" the young witch said. "Oh, I have to congratulate her next time I see her. None of our classes overlap, but I'm sure we'll run into each other at lunch sooner or later."

"Oh, oh," Leslie said as they methodically folded and unfolded the dessert menu, "how's that going, by the way? You're more than halfway there! Have you thought about what you're gonna do once you graduate?"

Amanda inhaled sharply. "I'm... I've got a pretty good idea. The classes that are important for what I have in mind have been really slow-going, but..." She swirled her coffee around for a pensive moment, then took a sip. "Well. I still got time, you know? Things are gonna turn around. Penny made it work, I can make it work."

"Penny?" Leslie asked, waving at the barista.

"My sister. She started her own potion shop right after she got done with school, it's really successful."

Leslie's hand stopped mid-motion. They stared at Amanda, mouth agape. "Wait. What potion shop?"

"Uh, Penny Pots," Amanda said, quirking a brow. "Why?"

"OH MY GOSH!" Leslie said, loudly enough to startle the familiar snoozing on the next table over. "Your sister is '*Penny Pots*' Penelope?!"

"Uh... yeah?"

"Oh my gosh please introduce us! She's like, a local legend in alchemy, she's so cool!"

Amanda leaned back in her seat. "Uh... wow, Leslie, I didn't know you were a fan!"

Leslie sat down, realizing they'd stood up at some point during all the gushing. They scratched the back of their head. "Ahaha, sorry, sorry! I just, ah... I look up to her a lot."

"Oh, well, I mean... Yeah, I get that," Amanda said as she looked down into her coffee. "Did you also wanna get into alchemy, or...?"

"Oh, no no no!" Leslie quickly said. "I mean, I'd love to make potions and stuff, but... I couldn't, you know? Writing is a full-time job, and, well... it's... witch training is really hard. I couldn't do it. I'm really impressed you're going through with the whole thing, it's so difficult!"

"Well, I thought so too before, you know?" Amanda said with a weak smile. "But I guess I found my motivation. I'm sure you could make it work! Or, you know, you don't have to go through all of it if you don't want to; don't they do evening classes for some of the disciplines?"

"Yeah?" Leslie asked, pensive. "Maybe one day, haha."

"Yeah!" Amanda replied. She stared back down into her cup of coffee as the barista walked over to take Leslie's order. "Maybe one day."

Maybe one day someone would gush about *her* that intensely.

Vending I

"*Vending machines*," Penelope said with detached incredulity.

"Yeah!" Amanda answered. "It came up when I visited the council to go over the Mandmancy paperwork. Bern's got an in with someone who's retiring a bunch of their older models. We could get a bunch of them really cheap and use them to reach faraway customers!" She pulled the business plan up on her phone and showed it to her big sister with a grin.

Penelope rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Mandy, you *just* opened. Aren't you still rushing to build up an inventory? How are you going to fill one machine, let alone a whole flee—" She looked back at her younger sister. "Wait. We?"

Amanda's grin widened. "Unlike me, you've got the batch production process down. If I just put a few things in each machine and you fill up the rest with potions, I can make it work! You've got some slow-movers in your inventory, right?"

The alchemist scoffed. "Mandy, I've been in business for practically a decade! Things might look different when you're just starting out, but I assure you that—"

The angular gem hanging from Penelope's collar glowed.

"—I could use the help!" she said, her left eye twitching.

Amanda smirked.

"Argh!" the older witch shouted, turning to hide the rush of color to her cheeks. "Listen, the council's still not done with me, remember?" she said, tugging at the length of leather locked around her neck. "I could get saddled with an audit, or worse, a *babysitter*. This isn't the time to ask them for a favor."

Amanda tapped Penelope's shoulder reassuringly. "I'll handle it all,

okay? I'm taking the risk here, Penny, so please don't... wait, the truth collar let you say 'practically a decade'?" Her eyes went wide. "That you've been in business??"

The older sister turned back around, self-satisfaction balancing out the surge of embarrassment. "Seven years is practically ten."

"No it's not, haha!" Amanda said. "Oh my gosh, you're getting *sneaky*. Now who's learning from Esmeralda?"

The two of them exchanged smirks.

"Well," Penelope said, "I mean, I'm not opposed to this. But Mandy, are you sure this is a good idea? It's not like the witches quarter is that big. There's not that much market to reach."

"There's way more people than that. There's a market I've been wanting to reach since I got started! Penny, what if we thought bigger?" Amanda asked, barely containing her enthusiasm. "What if we didn't just sell to witches, or friends of witches, or friends of friends of witches?" She burst into a huge grin once again. "What if we made our brand of magic available to... the entire city!"

Penelope blinked. "The entire..." She shook her head. "Mandy, you can't get approval for that kind of distribution. The council's never gonna go for it."

"They trust me," Amanda said.

The alchemist held a couple of choice words back. "That's... That's so many locations! A whole new network! One we're not especially used to dealing with."

"Em knows a guy," the younger witch said, practically bouncing in place.

Penelope stared at her. "Why would Emilyynn... know a... oh. From before." She rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Of course she does."

"So?" Amanda asked with a sweet smile. "Partners?"

The older witch looked at her sister for a long moment, then sighed. "Fine. I'll round up some of my more harmless, temporary stuff. I'm sure I can find something to fill a few machines up."

"Woo!" Amanda cheered, holding out her hand.

"Alright," Penelope said, shaking her sister's hand with a hint of defeat. "What the hell. Let's do it."

Circle

Wham.

Bern looked up from his monitor. That sounded like a bird hitting a window, but softer. No, not a bird, more of a...

"Oh my gosh I am so sorry!" Emilyynn said as she opened the door, still wobbling. She made it all of two steps inside before one of her large

wings yanked a jacket clean off the entrance coat rack. "Oh no! I'm sorry!!"

"Good lord, are you doing alright there?" Bern asked as he rushed over to help the stumbling mouse girl.

"I'm okay! It sounded worse than it was! I, uh... I'm still getting the hang of this, haha..."

Bern quirked an eyebrow. "Now where have I heard that before..." Then it hit him. He crouched down to eye level and smiled. "Are you Emilynn?"

Emilynn grinned sheepishly. "H-hi!"

The witch gave a hearty laugh. "Well well, look at you! Has it been that long already? Come on, come on, let's make sure you're alright," he said as he led her to a nearby chair. "Demons are hardy, but everyone's got their limit."

Her wings had started folding back in on themselves by the time she sat down, making the whole process much easier. "Thank you," she said, too embarrassed to look him in the eye. "I'm, uh, I'm good I think!"

"Well, I'm glad! Learning to fly in a city's got its share of dangers. Or so I hear." Bern leaned over to check Emilynn's wings for damage and stopped mid-motion, making a low whistle. "That's handy," he said, pointing to the familiar's back.

"Hm? Oh! Yes!" she said, looking behind her as her wings visibly shrunk. "I, uh... I still don't know how it works, but they get really small when I don't need them." She made a cute little gesture. "Magic!"

"Magic indeed," he said as he walked over to the nearby vending machine. "Well, doesn't look like you got hurt in the landing, but let me get you some water, at least. What brings you here all aflutter?"

Emilynn perked up. "Oh! That, actually!"

"Hm?" Bern tapped a few buttons and turned to look back at the mouse girl as the machine made a series of satisfying *clunks*.

She pointed. "Amanda wanted to know, um... She told me about the vending machine thing!"

"Ohh, the *vending machine* thing. She works fast." He picked up the dispensed item and walked over to hand it to Emilynn.

The water bottle felt gigantic in her hands, despite the fact that she was the largest she could be at the moment. She took a deep breath and nodded to herself. The biggest change in her life was behind her, but she still had a lot of adjusting to do. "So, yeah! I wanted to check with you about the, uh... the distribution stuff."

"Sorry lil miss, sweet-talking me won't help; I don't do distribution anymore, I just happen to know a guy who's getting rid of a bunch of these."

"Thank you," the familiar said as she opened the bottle. She took a sip, then looked back up to him. "Okay so, I also know a guy!"

Bern blinked. "You know a guy?"

"A distribution guy!"

The tall witch chuckled. "*You* know a guy?"

"I know a guy!" she said with a big eager smile. "We met, uh... Before. You know?"

Bern slowly nodded as realization dawned. "Ohhh right. Yeah I heard rumblings about all that." He sized her up with a good-natured smirk. "Would've been refreshing to see *you* at trade shows, making deals."

Emilynn chuckled. "Well, I... I didn't really look like this back then, haha!" She took another long sip. "...Not at all."

Bern gave her shoulder a couple of reassuring pats. "No worries, I get it!" He walked back to his desk and slid his keyboard closer. "Well then, if you know a guy, then I'm sure my guy and your guy can get to talking and work this whole thing out."

The mouse demon smiled.

"Who knows?" Bern said, loading up the relevant contact info. "Maybe they'll even become friends!"

Council I

Mildred navigated her way through the haphazard distribution of seats and returned to her favorite chair, sitting down just as her legs were reaching their limit. She let out a long sigh of relief as she settled into the mold her body had carved out of the cushions over time.

Jacqueline, meanwhile, was still in the process of finding a comfortable resting position for her long—very long—*unusually* long catlike demon body. She eventually found a configuration of coils that worked for her and pawed at the book Mildred had propped open in front of her.

"Here you go, dears," Terpsichore said as she walked over from the kitchenette, handing Mildred a cup of tea and Jacqueline... well, more of a bowl of tea, really.

"Why, thank you!" they both replied in cheerful unison.

"Oh, I almost forgot," the head witch added as she reached for a nearby parcel, "Jackie, this came in for you today."

"Ooh!" the elder witch said as her eyes lit up. "What is it?"

The anticipation built as Terpsichore wordlessly ran a nail down the middle of the package and cut it open. "Oh! Well now, that's adorable," she said as she reached in and took out a tiny witch hat.

"It's here!" Jacqueline cheered with a toothy open-mouthed grin. "Hat me!"

Terpsichore gave a good-natured smirk as she gently placed the small hat on her colleague's fuzzy head before returning to her seat, her

tea, and her book. Jacqueline, for her part, wiggled with contented glee.

"Why..." Mildred began to say as she stared. "Why did you get a tiny version of your hat?"

"One must keep up appearances, wouldn't you say?" She preened. "Besides, it's customary for council members to don their hats during a vote."

"Oh not this again," Mildred said as a pained expression took over her face. "Jackie, staying like this any longer is dangerous! You've had your fun, now *please* listen to reason and dispel this."

"Come on Milly, I've still got a solid month left. Heck, maybe even two, based on Penny's estimates!"



"You saw how that went for the last person who tried it, didn't you? Aren't you worried about the risks?"

Jacqueline shrugged. "I've risked bigger."

Mildred scoffed and took a sip of her tea. "Suit yourself," she added. "It's not like you'll be using that hat much, after all; demons can't be on the council."

The council witch-turned-temporary-demon smirked. "Oh? And where does it say that?"

"Where does—oh fine," Mildred said, putting her teacup down with a huff. "I'll show you!" She reached toward the shelves across the room and, with a few hurried hand gestures, plucked a tome from it and caught it as it flew toward her. She flipped to an early section and put her finger down on the paper. "There! It is literally rule—"

Silence. Except for the sound of Terpsichore turning another page as she read.

Mildred stopped. Peered closer. "What happened to rule twelve?"

Jacqueline's smug smirk only grew. "Oh hum, looks like there's no rule against it, is there? Well then, I suppose me and my hat will—"

"Did you *change the council charter*?!"

The now-tiny witch pulled her paws up in the best approximation of crossing her arms that she could. "Last meeting, third action item, two ayes, no nays, check the minutes."

Mildred shot her a cocktail of a look that was equal parts infuriated and baffled. She quickly yanked the printed minutes from the shelf—causing some collateral damage of spilled papers—and ran her fingers through the pages. “CORA!” she bellowed. “Cora, you *seconded the motion?!’*”

Jacqueline chuckled as she let herself flop onto her back. She gave her new hat a closer examination, rumbling with satisfaction.

Terpsichore turned to the next page. “Can’t stand in the way of progress, Mildred.”

Home I

Emilynn’s eyes gently opened as a stray little sunbeam finally made its way to her face. It took her a few moments to shake the cobwebs and come back to reality. It was morning. Morning at last! She stretched, took a deep breath, and gently slipped out of Amanda’s arms as she got out of bed.

Their bed, she thought with a giddy smile.

Her witch was still soundly asleep, having sprawled out over the course of the night. It always took her more time—and several alarms—to finally get up, which gave Emilynn plenty of time to get their morning routine started.

The mouse girl carefully stepped around the various obstacles strewn across the carpet and made her way to the kitchen corner of Amanda’s studio apartment. She let out a soft yawn as she went through her usual list: get the coffee started, check out breakfast options, prepare the day’s task board... She stopped as something caught her eye. She took a careful step toward Amanda’s desk and gave her witch hat a closer look; leaned in for an inquisitive sniff or two. Hm. The enchantment was starting to wane; they’d have to recharge it soon. She made a mental note to mention it during breakfast.

She rubbed her eyes. Goodness, she was still tired, even after a night’s rest. Maybe it wasn’t as easy to get used to sleeping with another person as shows and movies made it out to be. It had been much easier when she was tiny.

There. Water was heating up, breakfast was planned, and the day’s schedule was as organized as Amanda would tolerate. Emilynn still had a lot to teach her when it came to project management, but she knew how quickly her witch got discouraged when she hit a wall. So she was taking it slow; baby steps and all that.

Emilynn sleepily wandered into the bathroom and stared at the sink for a solid minute before she realized there wasn’t actually a whole lot she needed to do there; demon bodies were very efficient. But old

habits were hard to break. She looked up at her reflection to check her teeth, teeth that would always be perfect. Gosh, had it been just a couple months since she first saw herself in this mirror? Granted, she was much smaller back then, but... time flew.

She passed her fingers through her hair a bit and it stuck in place just the way she wanted. She smiled. Being a demon still held many surprises.

Her smile quickly grew into a goofy grin as she locked gazes with her reflection, unable to look away.

"Oh my gosh," she whispered. "I did it. I actually did it."

She gently tugged at one of her large mouse ears and carefully put her finger to the tip of a horn that, all told, wasn't really all that sharp.

"That's me," she said, smiling wide enough to show her fangs.

"That's really me."

Her ears perked up as they picked up a faint sound from the other room. Amanda was waking up! Emilyynn waved goodbye to the cute mouse girl in the mirror and scurried off, excited to start a new day.

Council II

"I mean, Jacqueline's research is one thing," Mildred said as Terpsichore gave everyone's teacups a refill, "but what sort of precedent does this set?"

"Hm?" Terpsichore replied wordlessly as she returned to her seat.

"What's stopping everyone on the council from just turning into demons? Is this where we're at now?"

The head witch shrugged. "It's not much different from where we were all those years ago. Remember back when we still thought the council witches were mostly men? And look at us now!" She spread her arms in a grandiose gesture.

"Wh—this isn't the same thing at all!"

"Perceptions change over time, Mildred, and we adjust." Terpsichore took a sip. "Our little city's at the forefront of a lot of things these days."

Mildred hrmphed and settled back into her seat. Two tiny paws appeared on her armrest, followed by Jacqueline's face as the demon witch lifted herself up to eye level.

"Cheer up, Milly!" the diminutive council member said. "After all, aren't we trailblazers?"

Mildred let out a long sigh. "It feels like we've both had enough of that for a lifetime."

"It has been a busy life," Jacqueline conceded as she tilted her head to the side. "But y'know, based on recent events..." She grinned widely, showing her little fangs. "It's never too late to start a new one."

Trailblazers I

Mildred and Jacqueline had retired to the small garden behind the council house. It was their usual spot to take an afternoon nap, listen to children playing in the park down the street, and recharge for whatever the evening had in store for them. And while the fairer-haired witch had already nodded off with her sleeping mask on, the witch-turned-provisional-demon couldn't quite settle into her favorite patio chair.

Meow?

Jacqueline peeked down at the ground. One of the neighborhood cats had wandered in, as they often did at this time of day. Mildred had decided to hand out treats once and the local feline population had never forgotten. "Meow!" the small furry witch replied, trying the sound on for size.

The cat got closer, sniffing at the air.

Jacqueline dangled over the edge of the chair to get a closer look, still getting a feel for just how much leeway she had to do this now that her body was multiple lengths longer than it used to be.

The cat approached closer still, and tentatively leaned in for a friendly nose boop.

Boop!

Jacqueline gently wiggled. Never too old to make new friends, she figured.

Meow!

"Meow meow!" the witch replied cheerfully.

Meowwww!

They took turns meowing at each other; Jacqueline lost track of time as she varied the tone, the speed, all in a good-natured attempt at communicating with her new acquaintance.

"Meow meow MEOW meow me—"

"WHAAAT?" Mildred bellowed as she tore off her sleeping mask, causing the cat to dart off and vanish through a gap in the fence. "What is it?? Jackie I'm trying to sleep!"

Jacqueline froze in place, wide-eyed.

Mildred sighed and rubbed her eyes. "Sorry, it's just... oh, you know what a short fuse I have when I'm tired." She looked at where the cat had been, then to her colleague. She gently tapped the empty spot on the patio chair that Jacqueline had vacated, and the smaller witch gently curled back up in her spot. "I'm sorry I made your friend run away."

"It's okay, Milly," Jacqueline said, settling back in. "We did get a little carried away."

"What on *earth* were you two talking about anyway?"

"I dunno!" the demon witch replied with an open-mouthed toothy smile. "I'm not a cat!"

Home II

"Oh, how about pasta?" Amanda asked as she checked the upper cabinets. "Do we have everything?"

Emilynn peeked beyond the stacks of soda cans and condiment bottles. "I think I see sauce?" she said, venturing a little deeper into the fridge. "Oh, uh, nevermind, it's almost empty. And... not the right color," she added with a wince. At least it wasn't glowing with magical energy like that *thing* in the corner. That thing she hadn't quite worked up the courage to investigate yet..

"Dang," Amanda said as she tapped away on her phone. "Well, adding that to the list I guess. Is there, like... *anything* that could make a meal?"

Emilynn braced herself and leaned in as far as she could. The fridge was in desperate need of a complete and thorough cleaning. Some of the things in there were even older than she was. Well, her demon self, she corrected. How did that even work? Was she just a few weeks old now? That seemed weird and inaccurate. But then again, she certainly didn't feel like she was about to turn fort—

"Em?" Amanda asked.

"Oh, sorry!" the familiar said as she stopped daydreaming and started taking stock of what was usable for a meal. Not much, it turned out.

"Not much, it turns out," Emilynn said as she finally emerged from the cavernous appliance.

"Oh my gosh are you okay?!" Amanda asked with a start.

Emilynn just looked back at her, dumbfounded. "Y... yes? Why?" She closed the fridge door and stepped away, wondering if she'd nicked herself or—"AAAH!"

She recoiled, staring at her hands. They were fuzzy! Her arms were fuzzy! Her... entire...

"What happened??" the young witch asked, rushing over to her side.

"I don't know!" Emilynn replied, tentatively poking one hand with the other. She wasn't in pain. She was just... fluffy. An entire layer of light blue fur had seemingly materialized all over her skin without her noticing. "I'm... I'm okay I think?" she said, patting herself down. She looked at Amanda with a tinge of embarrassment. "Did I do this?"

The witch gently placed a hand on her, to no ill effect. "...Maybe?" she said. "I mean, this isn't the first time you've adapted to something, right? Maybe this is just... something you can do?" She scratched her

head. "Accidentally?"

Emilynn kept staring at her arms. Now that she thought about it, the fridge hadn't seemed that cold... did her body just adapt to temperatures, just like that? She squinted, trying to move muscles that weren't quite there. Or, well, muscle probably wasn't the right word, but... that's what made the most sense to her.

The light fur all over her skin started receding. It was getting pretty warm now that she wasn't exploring the inside of an icebox.

"Hhhuh," they both said in unison.

"I... guess I'm full of surprises?" Emilynn said with an awkward smile.

"I guess so, haha!" Amanda said as she leaned in for a hug. "Gosh, are you just going to fuzz up all winter?"

"Maybe?" Emilynn said, half embarrassed, half relieved. "If I get cold! Or, well, so that I *don't* get cold."

"Are you okay with that?"

"I mean, it's not like I'm not already fuzzy part of the time... I'll see how I feel about it?"

Amanda patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Well either way, I'm sure we can come up with ways to keep you warm," she said with a grin. "If that's what you want, of course."

"M-MAYBE!" Emilynn said with a flustered grin. "Okay! Um! Dinner!"

"Yes, haha, let's figure that out first!" the witch replied, ruffling her familiar's head affectionately before giving the pantry a second look.



Trailblazers II

Mildred stared at the leaves on the trees as they swayed in the wind of the council house's backyard.

"Penny for your thoughts," Jacqueline said as she looked up at her from the nearby chair.

Mildred sighed. "What if this is how it's going to be from now on."

"Hm? What, having a relaxing afternoon after a solid half day of research?"

"No," Mildred said as she gestured at the both of them, "you know... this. What if every witch just does this now? Prolongs their life and regains unnatural vigor by turning into a demon?"

"It does sound appealing when you put it like that."

"This isn't funny, Jackie!" Mildred said, shaking her head.

"Are you worried about me? This isn't like Vincent's case, you know."

"I know, I'm not... thinking about that whole thing. This is clearly not some furious craving for power or whatever it is he wanted. It's just... Is this what we all must look forward to now?" She leaned closer, resting her chin on her hand. "Proud witches one by one becoming adorable fluff balls? Will the council house become a daycare for demons?"

Jacqueline looked up at the roof of the building pensively. "I mean, you paint a pretty compelling picture."

"Jackie!"

"Isn't that what it already is, though? We do have the list of protected familiars. And have you seen the den? Milly, it's so cozy on the inside, you have no idea!"

"Jackie, please," Mildred implored. "What will everyone say at the regional when the keynote speaker is a... flying... cat snake?"

"I like to think I'm a lucky cat dragon," Jacqueline replied with a proud smile.

"Jackie, you look nothing like a dragon."

"No, one of those long fuzzy dragons!"

"Those aren't a thing, Jackie."

Jacqueline made a grandiose gesture. "Clearly they are! Look at me!"

"*Jackie*," Mildred said, visibly at her wit's end.

Her colleague coiled back up and took a more serious pose. "Listen, Milly. I'm getting on in years, we both have. It's been *so long* since I've come across something so... interesting! Give me this, at least. Like I said before, we have a bit of time here. Think of the research papers we can turn this into!"

Mildred let out a long sigh and settled back into her chair. "It's not the time I'm worried about."

Jacqueline floated up to eye level, anchoring herself on the headrest of Mildred's seat. "You're worried I'm not going to take the dispel potion."

Mildred gave her a resigned look. "What will the kids say, Jacqueline?"

"Oh, probably something like '*oh goodness, Grandma, you're so cute!*' '*Grandma, may I pet you?*' '*Grandma, let's take a picture!*'"

Mildred rolled her eyes.

"You know I'm right! You've met my grandchildren."

Mildred sat up straight. "What about your legacy, Jackie?"

"Ahh, so that's what this is about."

"Please think of what you'd be committing to! Are you truly ready to

leave no trace of your own past?"

"I'd still be here! Besides, I pop into class now and then, why would that change? I'd just have them update my portrait in the main hall!"

Mildred scoffed. "Do you really think younger witches are going to be inspired by the portrait of a demon in the main hall? Just sitting there in the middle of all the distinguished witches?"

"Oh, I'll still be me, even if I look different! This is simply a new and cuddly development." Jacqueline made a framing gesture with her paws. "Picture this: my old portrait, same background, same chair, but with me sitting in my own lap!" She gave Mildred an eager smile.

"But... that doesn't make any sense..."

"It's a painting, Milly! I can make it look like anything I want."

Mildred gave Jacqueline a sidelong glance. "And what should we put on the plaque? *'Beloved Witch, Then Pet?'*"

"Oh, I can do better than that!" The diminutive witch grinned, showing off her little fangs. "I'm sure I could get at least *'Beloved Witch, Beloved Pet.'* But honestly there's not going to be much space left after *'Legendary Magical Pioneer,'* so really, it's academic!"

Mildred sighed, leaning back into her chair again. "You'd better keep your old self in there."

Jacqueline gave her body an experimental wobble, floating over to drape herself over Mildred's shoulders. She gave her colleague a reassuring shoulder pat. "Whatever happens, my legacy will be intact, Milly. Don't worry. Besides, isn't it about time we make way for the new generations of witches? You've seen what they're capable of; there's one on the council already. Before you know it, they'll be the ones inspiring all of us."

"Mm."

They both looked up as the treetops swayed in the wind again.

"I see why Esmeralda does this," Jacqueline observed quietly. "It really *is* comfy."

Mildred leaned her head to the side in a gentle hug.

Vending II

"Uh, is this good?" Leslie asked as they maneuvered the box of empty bottles past the maze of shelves and up to the counter.

"You *lost* it?!" Penelope yelled into her phone. "How do you *lose* a vending machine? It's as heavy as a horse! No, no, I don't care, it doesn't matter. Who would even steal a vending machine? Why not just break it open?? Wouldn't that be way less trouble?"

Leslie shifted their grip on the box, desperately looking for a spot to put it down. "Uh, Penny?"

"Listen, just—one sec, Leslie—just write a report or something and send it in writing, I'll take it up with the insurance company. I swear, if I'd have known this whole venture would... what do you mean *'in case it comes back'*? It's as *heavy* as a horse, it can't *walk* like one!"

"P-Penny!"

The alchemist looked at Leslie, who at this point was one fumble away from a catastrophe of broken glass. She quickly lifted a stack of papers with her spare hand and made room on the counter. "Sorry, here, put 'em down here. Thanks."

Leslie put the box of returned potion bottles down gently before slumping down on a nearby footstool with a relieved sigh. They strained to identify the voice coming out of Penelope's phone. "Hey Penny, is that Lisa's Pizzas? Did their vending machine disappear ag—"

"*Like last time?*!" the alchemist replied to the caller with a jolt of disbelief. "What do you mean like last time? This isn't the first time you lost it?!" She looked at Leslie and shook her head as she pointed at the phone in her hand, looking for sympathy.

But Leslie nodded instead. "Yeah, they put theirs outside, right? Sometimes it's not there."

"What."

"Yeah!" Leslie continued. "Sometimes when I do a restocking run, it's not there! But it usually comes back the next time. I figured it was normal."

"Of course that's not normal!" Penelope whined, visibly starting to lose her grip on reality. "Leslie, why would that be normal? It's a giant heavy box that's *full* of magic stuff, not *made* of magic stuff! It's perfectly ordinary! It's not supposed to..." The alchemist sat down in her chair. "It's not... supposed to just disappear. Much less come back! That's even more worrying!" She rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Lesliiiiie... Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Leslie shrugged. "I mean, it had still almost sold out, and the money counted out just fine, so... I figured it was working as intended. I'm sorry Penny, I'm still really new at this."

Penelope leaned back to stare at the ceiling.

Leslie leaned over and tentatively patted the alchemist on the shoulder. "So long as it's vending, doesn't really matter *where* it vends, right?" They smiled weakly.

"What did Mandy get me into," the alchemist whispered to no one in particular.

Home III

"Hey Em, it's starting!" Amanda shouted over the TV.

"I'll be right there!" Emilyynn replied as she rushed over with the tiniest bowl of blueberries in her hand. She sat down next to her witch on the edge of the bed.

"Oh wow, is this all that was left? Is that going to be enough for you?" the witch asked. "You can share my chips if you want!"

The familiar wordlessly handed over the small bowl of fruit, which Amanda accepted with no small amount of confusion.

Poof!

Emilyynn emerged from the pile of clothing that crumpled down around her, having shrunk down to her smallest mouse form. She sat back on her hind legs, holding up both paws.

"Ohh, I see, haha!" Amanda said as she handed back the bowl, now a proper feast for the little familiar. "You're so clever, you know that?"

Squeak!

Both of them dug in as the documentary began to play.

Council III

Mildred sat up with a loud gasp, rousing everyone from their lazy afternoon. Both Avignon and Emily nearly dropped their phones. "CORA!" the elder witch shouted.

Terpsichore sat upright, shaking the last remnants of her nap away. "Wh... what is it, Mildred?"

"Cora, we need to reinstate article twelve, with—"

"Hey!" Jacqueline interjected, finding her way out of the demon-sized pretzel she'd coiled herself into as she slept.

Mildred quickly reached over to give her colleague appeasing pets. "We need to reinstate article twelve with a corollary to handle Jacqueline's previous status and current condition."

Terpsichore rubbed her eyes. "Mildreddd, why? And why now?"

"Any demon could join the council right now!" she replied emphatically. "Not just Jackie!" She looked to Jacqueline, who was staring at what her hand was doing. Mildred followed her gaze. Stopped petting. Carefully pulled her hand back. And started sweating profusely. "My goodness Jackie, I am *so sorry!* I swear I wasn't thinking! Force of habit, you know?" She gave a wincing smile.

Avignon scratched the back of their head. "I do not see why this is a problem. It is not like any demon can just walk in and get a majority."

Mildred leaned forward. "What if it's *her*?"

A chilling silence fell over the room.

"Wait, what?" Emily asked, shaking her head as she looked at her hushed colleagues. "Really? You're worried about Penny's ca—"

"Emergency meeting!" Terpsichore said as she stood up. "Emily,

dear."

Emily just stared at her as she swiped over to the minutes app on her tablet without looking. "Yeah? Sure. Okay."

Everyone donned their hats.

Mildred's hand shot up as she cleared her throat. "Ahem, new proposal: reinstate article 12; council members must be human from birth, along with corollary 12a, existing council members who become demons may remain on the council!"

Emily raised an eyebrow at Mildred. "From birth? *Really* Mildred?"

Mildred closed her eyes, nodding. "You're right, you're right, strike that part."

Avignon snapped their fingers. "What about classic corruption?"

"Right, that can get rather bad, ah..." Mildred frowned, nervously looking back at the front door. "May remain on the council provided they are judged fit for duty by a majority!"

Terpsichore nodded. "That should do for now, I think. Jacqueline?"

The currently smallest council witch nodded, visibly distracted. "Yes, I think that's fine."

The head of the council raised her hand. "Motion seconded, all in favor say aye?"

"Aye!"

"Let the record show a majority of ayes motion passed meeting adjourned!" Terpsichore put her hat down onto her chair and briskly walked over to the kitchenette. "Well! I believe I need more tea."

Emily put the finishing touches on the meeting minutes and put her tablet away. She leaned on her podium and shot everyone a *look*. "Going to all this trouble just in case... Hey, you *do* know she's just a big harmless fuzzball, right?"

Mildred disregarded her younger colleague and sunk back into her chair with a loud sigh. "Goodness gracious that was a close one." She turned to Jacqueline. "Can you believe we almost... ah..."

Jacqueline had resumed staring at her from the vantage point of Mildred's armrest. She reached out and put a paw down on the witch's hand. "What was *that*?"

The elder witch was mortified. "Jackie, please accept my apologies, I... I just got so *used* to it with Brimstone all these years, I wasn't thinking."

Jacqueline narrowed her eyes, pondered for a moment, then nodded. "Apology accepted." With that, she flopped back onto her seat.

Mildred breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, dear," she said, taking a sip.

"Just ask next time!"

It was all the elder witch could do not to spit out her tea.

Apprentice

"And... done!" Leslie said as they put the last item on the shelf. They started folding up the box as they returned to the counter. "That's another restock done!" they announced to no one in particular.

Well, maybe to Esmeralda, who was stirring from her spot on the small trellised bench she liked. "You seem to be getting the hang of this," she said as she poured herself onto the ground in a waterfall of shadows and fur.

Leslie froze in spot as Penelope's familiar made her way to their side, flowing up the side of the counter before coming to a rest on top. The demon returned to her usual catlike form, opening her three eyes one by one and smiling with too many teeth.

"Uh, h-hi Esmeralda," Leslie said with a sheepish smile, "had a good nap?"

"I'm used to Penelope's comings and goings enough to sleep through them, but you..." She looked up. "You I haven't gotten used to." Her smile grew wider. "Yet."

"Ah, hahaha... I, uh, I've been helping out for a while! Mostly at festivals. But Penny's letting me help with the shop now, too!"

Esmeralda tilted her head. "I suppose I should visit one of these festivals I hear so much about. Are we to have a new witch among us, then?"

"Uh, no," Leslie said, looking off to the side. "Well, not exactly. I'm getting my alchemist certification."

"Alchemy without magic?" the cat demon said as she walked along the counter. "What will humans think of next!"

"Well, there's still magic, it's just... The hard part is spellcasting, right? But there's a lot you can do with alchemy without actual spells, so if you just rely on enchanted tools that can do the casting for you... It works out!"

Esmeralda's eyes grew big; bigger than they should have been able to. "Ah, but magic powers the tools, magic recharges them." She stepped up to the edge, leaning in closer to Leslie with every word. "Where. Does. All. That. Magic. Come. From?" Her face lit up with a cheshire smile.

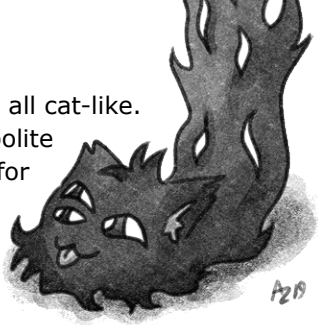
"Ah... haha... well... okay, there's *some* magic involved, ahaha..." Leslie said as they backed away from the counter. "But that part is a lot easier to learn, it turns out? So I figure, if I can manage that, and study really diligently... Maybe I can find someone to mentor me! You know, take me under their wing!" They gave a nervous smile.

"An alchemist willing to take on an apprentice? Why, I wonder if there's any of those around here..." Esmeralda's form shook itself loose into multiple tendrils of fur, causing Leslie to yelp in surprise as they

flowed down around them to reunite on the bench, all cat-like.

The green-haired part-timer gave a quick, polite wave and hightailed it out of the store, desperate for some sunlight.

"I do love apprentices," Esmeralda mused. "They're so much fun to play with."



Home IV

Amanda gently lifted her bowl of chips as Emilynn climbed into her lap. The first nature documentary had made way for the second, and now the third, but neither of them wanted to stop at this point.

Emilynn curled up, spinning around a couple times until she had both a comfortable position and a nice vantage point to continue watching. The great thing about being so small is that it turned every television show into a movie. Granted, this one was about cats, and while some part of her felt she should be afraid, she reasoned that she wasn't *really* a mouse; she just looked a lot like one. Deep down, she was a demon. Right? That's how it worked, wasn't it? She made a mental note to ask Esmeralda about that again next time.

"Ohh," Amanda said as she put the bowl aside to look at Emilynn more closely. "I've been wondering about that! Mice usually have little grabby hands, right? But you have big fuzzy paws, with little pads even."

Emilynn looked down at her hands, or what passed for them. She hadn't really paid attention to it, but Amanda was right; these didn't look like mouse hands. Was that a demon thing? She hadn't really gotten to hang out with many others, but it seemed every familiar she met was never quite just one animal.

"Do you think it's because of your size?" Amanda asked. "You're pretty big for a mouse, so maybe you need bigger paws that support your weight. And the fur muffles the noise! You're a quiet type, after all."

The mouse demon was lost in thought. She hadn't really questioned the way she looked, figuring that she was just a specific kind of demon. But that wasn't how it worked, was it? It did mean a sort of tradeoff; she was quieter, but she lacked the fine manipulation that a mouse had. She briefly wondered if she would have grown to miss being able to hold things if she hadn't evolved into a form that had hands so soon.

But she had. So really, this was just one side of her; she could be tiny and quiet some of the time, and bigger with more dexterity whenever she wanted to mix it up. She held up her paws approvingly. This was how she was, and that was okay.

Amanda gently took the mouse demon's paws in her hands and wiggled them. "Like little cat paws! Do you think there's a bit of cat in

you?"

...*Squeak*? Emilyynn had never thought of it that way. Maybe there was. Maybe that's why her and Esmeralda got along so well.

That part was new to her, too. Amanda being perfectly willing to accommodate her other relationship had meant so much to Emilyynn. It was possible to have room for more than one person in her life, turns out! Even if one of them was a really big part of it. She still had a lot to learn, but she was doing her best. Like her witch often said, they were a team; they'd make it work.

Amanda leaned in closer. "No matter what though, you're still my favorite mouse," she said with a big smile.

Squeak!

Naptime

The small hatch at the bottom of the wall led to a twisting passageway that opened up into a place tucked away from the attention of the council house's human inhabitants. A dimly-lit cave carved out of wood and filled with cushions, council witches referred to it as the demon den.

It was here the council house's menagerie of familiars went to nap, and Jacqueline wanted in on the action.

The local familiars had quickly warmed up to her joining their ranks, which had been nice. After all, the place saw a rather frequent rotation of resident demons thanks to students and visiting witches, so why treat this newfound friend any differently?

Jacqueline had half expected her drastic change in nature to affect her sleeping schedule, but she was still matching Mildred's daily pace without too much trouble. She made a mental note to talk to her about that later.

The den itself had been decorated with some synthetic plants intertwined with low-intensity string lights. Not for visibility purposes, as demons uniformly had excellent senses—something Jacqueline was still getting used to. No, this was a little touch to remind familiars of home. Mildred had documented the stories of bioluminescent plant life in the otherworld thanks to her time with... was it the demonic slime mold? Or the glass-blower's stained glass spider? She couldn't remember. The story had been corroborated by enough demons that the council had gotten a clear enough image to replicate it here in some way. And it made the den quite cozy.

Cozier still was the... Jacqueline lacked the vocabulary for it. Magical warmth? So many familiars hung out here regularly that the air was thick with the most comfortable concentration of magic the elder witch had felt yet. And as she had only recently become able to feel magic,

every standout experience was all the more remarkable.

Jacqueline padded her way in, wasting no time finding a comfy spot to snooze in. Back at the magic school, Mildred was undoubtedly having her afternoon nap between classes. The other two familiars present instantly gravitated to the lengthy ball of fluff the moment she settled down, and soon a new cuddle pile had formed.

The witch-turned-provisional-demon smiled as she drifted off to sleep. She'd have to convince some of her colleagues to try this.

Trailblazers III

Mildred eased herself back down into her favorite meeting hall chair with a dramatic sigh, putting her cane aside once she was nice and comfortable. Jacqueline, meanwhile, attempted to drape herself over the cushion into a somewhat comfortable shape as she floated down onto it. Once properly settled, both returned to their reading material; they had classes to prepare, after all, and papers to write.

"Oof," Mildred said to no one in particular as she flipped forward to her bookmark. "New witches are pushing back the boundaries of magic and getting in trouble, alchemy's scary again, my girlfriend's turning into a demon, and to top it all off, she's excited about it! What a world."

"What!?" Jacqueline shouted as stood as upright as she could, wobbling slightly.

Mildred stared at her colleague, taken aback. "I... said, *what a world*—"

"You said girlfriend."

Mildred's eyes widened. "I... I did not??" she sputtered.

"YOU SAID GIRLFRIEND!" Jacqueline repeated with the biggest grin as she leapt onto the armrest between them.

Mildred went beet-red, leaning back into her seat. "I..."

Jacqueline leaned in with a cheshire smile and an audible rumble of glee. "You. Said. *Girlfriend!*"

Home V

Emilynn tucked her head under Amanda's chin as they snuggled up for the last documentary of the night, making sure her horns were nowhere near poking distance. As fun as it was to curl up in her lap in mouse form, being (almost) the same size was also really nice. The amazing versatility of having multiple forms was one of the parts of being a demon that she'd taken to very quickly. It was almost second nature by now, even after so little time.

"Hey Em?" Amanda asked softly.

"Hm?"

"Did you know you were going to evolve into this form? In the moment, I mean. Back on the night that Penny called."

Emilynn blinked. "Not really," she answered. "I didn't know what was going to happen. Not even the first time. I just..." She thought back to that night. The contract. The split-second decision. The single most important choice of her life. "I just wanted to tell you the truth," she said, holding her tight.

Amanda stroked her hair softly.

A long moment passed as they both watched the sun set over a distant forest filled with animals neither of them had ever seen.

"So... you didn't know you'd be person-sized again?" Amanda asked.

Emilynn shook her head.

"You were ready to just stay a little mouse girl... forever? With me?"

Emilynn held on tighter. "...Yeah."

Amanda squeezed her close, nuzzling her hair. She sniffled.

The mouse familiar carefully turned her head upward to look into her witch's eyes.

They both smiled through the tears, and leaned in for a kiss.

Demand III

"Penny Pots," Penelope mumbled into her phone as she idly browsed on her computer. The store had technically closed, but she hadn't felt like locking the door and turning the lights off just yet. Besides, you always got the most interesting customers just past closing time. "Yup. Mm hm."

She blinked and sat up, willing herself to be more awake. "Oh so *you're* the ones who bought out my stock of girl potions. Had fun?"

She put an appeasing hand up to no one in particular. "Hey now! Listen, I don't get caught up in frat affairs. What you do with your purchases is your bus—yeah I got dispel potions. I tried to sell y'all on the combo deal but whoever was here yesterday wasn't interested."

Penelope stood up and walked over to her display cases. "Like I said, it's your business! I'm just happy to provide." She double-checked the quantities on the floor and went back to her computer to check the previous day's sales and do some quick math. "Alright, let me get that sorted for you. So fifteen dispel potions comes out to—"

She paused.

"Seven?"

Penelope leaned back in her chair, her face an imperceptible mask. "Just seven."

She raised her hand again. "No, no, listen, I just sell the potions! Seven it is, suit yourselves. I'll box 'em up with some aftercare instructions. Yup, all day tomorrow. Okay bye."

She hung up and took a long breath, exhaling slowly.

"Every time."

Vending III

There was excitement in the air as a group of young adults in colorful jackets made their way down the street.

They'd been following the matches between cram sessions, after each exam, even through their graduation party. Now the quarterfinals were upon them, and a local theater was playing the entire day's worth on one of its giant screens. They all agreed this was a worthy reward after yesterday's grueling, meticulous tour of the job fair.

A taller girl walked behind them, staring at the back of their shoes. Waiting for an opportunity to speak up.

"I... I think the Catsup Corps have it in this matchup," she finally said when the moment was right. "I've been looking over their daily practice streams, and their teamwork is the best in the league right now. They've finally learned not to get split up, which makes up for them having weaker individual players."

"What about the new stage layouts?" one of them asked. "They haven't had time to practice those. Mayo Nades have always been better at improvising."

She nodded. "That's true, but the quarterfinals have longer matches. The longer it goes, the better the Cats will get. I think they're gonna—huh."

The group kept walking, but soon realized she'd stopped in her tracks. They turned around to see what had happened.

The aging vending machine felt strangely out of place, set up on an isolated stretch of sidewalk with no apparent rhyme or reason. It wasn't next to a business or a rest stop; it just stood against a tall hedge shielding the nearby backyard from pedestrians' prying eyes.

"Oh yeah," one of them said, stepping away from the group, "this street's got weird vending machines sometimes. The ones at the theater are better, though."

She stared intently. There was something deeply appealing about the strange wares on display. A comb, some plastic-looking necklaces, and rows upon rows of colorful bottles.

Another one of them looked to her, then back to the group. "Is she...?"

"Oh yeah, she gets like that, it's fine!"

"You sure she's okay?"

She looked up, realizing the discussion was about her. "Oh! Uh, yeah, sorry, go on ahead! I'll catch up!"

"Yeah? Okay, we'll wait for you! Don't take too long though!"

The group left her to her window-shopping and resumed their leisurely walk.

She smiled to herself as she read the descriptions on the little pieces of cardstock tied to each bottle. "Whoaaa, are these for real?" she said with a wide grin. "Ooh! I want hot pink hair! Or... or bright orange hair!" She pressed her nose to the glass. "A... calm balm? Is that something you can just buy? It sounds like medicine you'd need a prescription for."

She carefully adjusted the pleats in her skirt while skimming the rest of the products. She didn't want to keep her friends waiting. She hadn't been a part of their group for that long, after all, but they'd warmed up to her instantly.

A sudden, giddy feeling enveloped her. She was still getting used to all this. She had friends! Real, actual friends who wanted to hang out with her, and cared about her, and knew her! Really knew *her*.

Just as importantly, they shared her love for this weirdly wholesome yet ruthlessly competitive game they were all spending a day to go see.

"I'll have to come back next time," she said, looking back at the group; they'd already made it to the bus stop. "Aah, this is so cool! Why didn't anyone tell me this existed?" She started to run after her friends—

But something caught her eye. She stepped over to the machine again and leaned down, zeroing in on a small bottle in the corner.

"Wait... girl potion? That's a thing? That's allowed??"

She fumbled for her purse, double-checked the readout on the machine, and then carefully inserted the correct bill into the machine.

Beep. Boop.

Ka-clunk!

"Booyah!" she whispered as she carefully lifted the bottle to her face, bouncing with glee. "Oh, this is going to save me so much time!"

"Hey!" one of them shouted from the street corner.

She unfolded the potion's tag, furrowing her brow at the words. "That's a weird street name. Is this from out of town, or..."

"Hey, River! C'mon, the bus is coming!"

She snapped out of it. "Oh! Okay! Thank you!" she replied, quickly putting the potion away in her purse.

River ran down the street, her twintails flying in the breeze. This summer was going to be positively *magical*.

Fin.

