

## **Hedgewitch Your Bets**

### **Chapter One**

"Okay...Let's see..." Cassie mutters as she steps across the floorboards of her shop, her thickly made boots scuffing across the wood in the quiet morning as she looks down at a notebook in her hand. "Gotta harvest the lavender, plant some more in the back, and the chamomile is ready for drying out and grinding. Ms. Johanson needs more moon water for her wards at home, Mr. Flaverty keeps begging for a love potion, I'll make up something for reflection and self responsibility. What do you think, Harvey?"

Harvey, her beloved, old, fat calico yawns at her from the shop's counter and she smiles.

"Yeah, I know but I can try to help the guy find someone. He's been so lonely since his wife died but he doesn't want to put work in, y'know? Being comfortable is death to finding new experiences, like granny always said. He'll figure it out and I'll help him."

She digs through the shop, preparing the things she knew she'd need. Lavender for sleep remedies, basil and rosemary for prosperity, sage for protection, then flowers for love, money, luck and so on. Everyone always wants something like that, she has to keep them on hand.

The full moon was last night so she grabs the large, glass decanters she had sitting outside and empties them into the large, almost empty barrel for storage, humming to herself. This should last her for a while. Big potion holidays aren't for a while, so it'll be personal issues that will sell potions right now, she won't have to keep too much on hand.

And so it was here in Hilda's Hideaway, the shop brought back to life after decades of forgotten condemnation. Tucked away between the alley on Weimaraner Street and down a half flight of brick steps beside the old Town Hall museum downtown, the once unseen path around the old building is lined with flowers that never wilt, vines that crawl through lattice scaffolds, and grass that stays green and fluffy, even now as winter begins. It's a place of humble intent, good wishes, and a natural, honest magic that can smooth the edges of modern life with a bit of spirit that only nature could offer.

And it's just on the street from this herbalist's haven, that destiny tugs the strings upon.

Or more directly, two troublemaker brothers tug tightly the strings to a third's hood, closing it tight over his glasses and causing him to stumble. As the hooligans laugh, Conrad gasps as he pulls the tension free, he shakes his hair loose and fixes his lenses, grimacing, "Come on guys, I need my face to do, like, everything involving getting back to my room."

Lawson knuckles the bespeckled student, snorting in jest, "Not a face anyone but your mother misses."

Dawson, equally chiding in tone and appearance, mirrors the proding into Conrad's shoulder, "Seriously man, we keep trying to actually make your life interesting, and you always find a way to mess it up. You're cursed."

Soft shouldered and clutching the straps to his tome and components bag. Conrad slows his step as he fades away from the assault, "If you call being obstinate about getting roped into

another hairbrained scheme as your patsy or lookout again, I'd say you guys are my curse. If it weren't for my help getting you through Runic Studies, I'd maybe wonder why you two are so insistent on me being the object of your attentions."

"Or maybe the object of our *intentions*?"

"Which are always to our benefit, yours including." The twin apprentice mages, whom's every step seem to be part of some sort of greater, environmental choreography, cast their hands out dramatically as they turn back to him,

"And, are neither hairbrained, nor schemes."

"Really Conrad, you make us sound like dime-store villains. Or is it that you fancy yourself the hero to your own mundane adventure?"

"A hero? No, I'm just trying to pass freshman year." He shakes his head at the duo, waving off their diatribe, "From the moment I met you two as my roommates, it's been nothing but drama and theatrics that you breathe and spout around me. I don't know how anyone takes you guys seriously."

"And there it is."

"Yes, your acceptance of the boring and predictable." Lawson and Dawson block Conrad's path, leaning in with pitying frowns,

"Youth is Life."

"Magic is Spontaneous." They speak as one as they wag disapproving fingers,

"And to be a Witch of Renown, you must pursue both equally."

Conrad smiles, gently pushing past then, "Which you keep saying I lack, yeah yeah. I'm more than happy to just be a successful mage with my own little domain to hole up in, respected by a select few and relatively unbothered by everyone else. You guys can shoot for your own stars on your own time without trying to cast them onto my cloak."

They both lean back and put hands to their hearts in half mock, half sincere concern. "Tsk, tsks." They say in unison.

"So afraid, wouldn't you say, brother?"

"Yes, I see it too, brother."

They circle around him, winding their arms over his shoulders.

"Connie, boy." Lawson whispers, pinching his cheek.

"You're so afraid of failure that you're not willing to try *anything* that will put you at risk." Dawson continues, ruffling his hair.

"No one lies on their deathbed regretting things they *did* do,"

"Only what they *didn't*."

"So used to being good, or at least disciplined in what everyone tells you to care about..."

"But not always what's important."

"Connections, conversations, relationships."

"Girls...Basically."

"Or guys, we don't discriminate, neither should you."

They spin in front of him and lean on each other again.

"When was the last time you even had a crush on someone, Connie boy?"

Stock still from the passive aggressive contact, Conrad shrinks inward, "I, ah... I mean like, active? Or imagined? Do they have to be real, or can they be a literary character?"

"Oh, no no."

"Someone you *might* actually try to go out with at some point."

"Whenever you grow the spine."

"Girl or guy, firstly?"

"Yes, we've always wondered about you."

"You're blushing, so certainly not against it."

"Anyone at school?"

"Out and about?"

"What's your type?"

Flustered and overwhelmed, he dips and dances out from their grasp, "Okay, okay! Quit crowding me, I can't think."

Smoothing his hair out, Conrad clears his thoughts, "I... I dunno. The thought of girls comes more... naturally I guess. Maybe... someone with similar interests, or fields of magic? Appearance isn't something I want to judge or seek out, I'd want something deeper, something we can... love to do, together."

His voice softens a touch, "One of those fated accidents, you know? We meet in a quiet place, somewhere warm and dark. Like reaching for the same chair in the study hall, or meeting eyes while pulling a book from a shelf, half seen through the stacks. Somewhere where others mind their business as something special happens, while that moment blooms and we ask each other on anniversaries if we still remember it as clearly as the other does. Wishing we had the foresight to capture the moment in amber before knowing what it would become..."

"..."

The twins have stopped dead, staring at Conrad before looking at each other.

"A romantic."

"I should say so."

"Yet, never reached out to anyone."

"A crime, really."

"Indeed, brother."

"We're going to have to fix that."

"Agreed."

"Why not now?"

"Also agreed."

They both reach out and grab him by the shoulders, steering him down the sidewalk.

"We happen to know of a nice little shop in town here."

"Ah, yes, we've frequented it quite a bit when we needed something for an assignment."

"Or a little extra luck."

"Indeed."

"It's owned by a sight of a girl, about our age, she's witty, sweet, everything you could ask for, really."

"We happen to know she's single."

"And you need practice, so even if she says no, hey, that's one under your belt."

"The only way to get good at something is to practice, right?"

"That's all you ever do, practice, study, so on?"

"Why not a little bit of applied study?"

"Chat her up."

"Ask her out."

"It will be good for you."

"And love may even blossom, who knows?"

Conrad sputters and stammers out of his reverie as they turn him down a little alley tucked away from the main road and the brick homes and shops to a world of natural color, a gardener's oasis in the midst of the modern surroundings. Flowers and herbs bloom as if spring were here, the little steps leading down to the cheerful door are even painted with images of flowers, a little cafe table with two chairs sits out front, an inviting little sight.

By the time he recovers, juggling his glasses and finding his breath, he whirls onto the twins, "W-what just happened? Did you charm me with something? I-I-Ive never just blurted out my inner voice like that! How did you do that?"

They chuckle in unison. "No worries, Conrad."

"Just looking out for you, is all."

They both twirl their wands in their fingers then slip them away.

"Feels good to get that out, doesn't it?"

"It really isn't healthy to bottle that up."

"We really have to keep an eye on you, don't we?"

"They grow up so fast."

Edging on panic, he summons an ounce of courage to face them fully, "Youuuuu, devils! And a Heart's Desire Spell is not only immoral, but advanced stuff! You can't go slinging charms like that without retaliation, you know?"

"Oh yes?" They ask, smiles sliding across their faces.

"And how will you retaliate, Conrad?"

"Subpar charms at best."

"Perhaps you can divine a good way to get back at us."

"But, since divination and runes take awhile to set up,"

"Why don't we just focus on this?"

"Go on in, chat up a girl and see where it takes you."

"You never know, maybe she'll lay you outright."

They both smile and lean forward.

"We dare you." They say slyly.

All air from Conrad's retaliatory response is stolen as he freezes, taking a step back, "You're... you're joking, the both of you. A Mage's Wager?"

"Indeed."

"Got it in one."

"Get to it, Connie boy."

"Or we can just call the Wager now, if you're too..."

"Chicken."

A gust of wind blows from the street, a thin flurry of snow carrying along with it the energy of Destiny Watching. Fear grips at him, but Conrad straightens a touch, "Fine. You invoke the Wager, to which we are now bound." A warm sensation shifts the temperature of the early winter air as he grips his bag straps and sets his jaw, "What are the terms?"

"You go in, you ask the girl out. Just give it a try."

"If she says yes, you have to go, no ghosting or bailing."

"Take your time, we don't want you to rush it."

"In return...Let's see..."

"What could we possibly offer you in return, Connie boy?"

His feet shift in thought over the Gambit, "I... I'm not sure, you're the ones confident that you're somehow doing this for my own good, despite my reservations. You'd even go so far as to cast against the mind of a fellow apprentice student, something wholly against campus doctrine. What's worth betting against me calling this off and just reporting you?"

"Well, for one, you already said we're bound to the wager..."

"We just haven't set the terms, yet."

"How about, in return we act as errand boys for you, library, lunch, class, whatever. You need it, we're your guys. You won't have to lift a finger so long as we're around."

"Little twin gophers to see to your whim."

His eyes widen at the offer, "That's... quite the prize... but i'm just getting to know you guys, and I'd feel kinda weird suddenly bring your Master..." something clicks, and his shoulders unwind a fraction, "Though, it'll mean I can literally tell you guys to go bother somebody else, and you'll actually listen."

"That is true."

"If that's what you wish for a whole week, we will listen."

"And to sweeten it, you can choose the week. Before finals? Quiet study all week long. Seven days straight, start when you say."

Feeling better knowing the time was fixed and flexible, Conrad nods, and unsheathes his wand, "Alright. I walk into that shop, my intent to ask the patron..." he raises his voice in annoyed agreeance, "...of whom I know NEARLY NOTHING ABOUT," his voice steadies again, "...out on a date. If she agrees, I participate... and if she denies me, you owe a week of fulfilling my word and command?"

"Sounds good."

"And you can get to know her before you ask, don't rush it." Lawson says with a smile.

"Yes, browse a bit, don't be unnatural."

Conrad's shoulders tense, "So I can't just go in there and get this over with? When is 'too soon' by your standards?"

"I mean, acting like a normal human is a good start."

"Yes, really Conrad, you may not be experienced with ladies but treat her like a person."

"You have to make a real attempt at it, not just throw it away or else it isn't a true wager."

"Yes, don't go Fey on us, you should know better. Wagers are the intent not words used."

"Thank goodness for that."

"Agreed."

With a roll of his eyes, Conrad raises his wand, "Alright, alright... the Terms are Set. May Destiny be kind to those who make this Wager... Say I."

"And I."

"And I."

Their wands meet with a little spark and the wind swirls around them in a momentary vortex of destiny. The air is hot and tingles with old magic, spoken into ancient Law thousands of years past and crafted with enigmatic, yet fair intent, and as the environment settles back into

the suntouched winter chill of afternoon, the lingering warmth leaves a small send of comfort, beside the electric static of his nerves,

"Well then... Here I am invoking old but magic on the whim of a pair of imp-twin roommates who think they know what's best for me... all within the first two weeks of the new semester. Brilliant."

"You'll see, Conrad. It's for your own good."

"We'll make a ladies man out of you, yet."

They smile and take spots leaning against the wall at the exit of the alley.

"Go on, then. We'll be right here."

His exit guarded by the double gargoyles of mischief, Conrad turns to the quaint, hand painted orange door with its cheery disposition and welcome mat below, wondering what sort of twist of fate awaits him inside.

The bell on the door gives its cheery ring and Cassie pauses in her work in the rafters, hanging herbs to dry. She spots the top of a head, long, brown hair and robes marking them as a student of the local magic college. She smiles.

"Always happy to serve the students of Neamora School of Witchcraft and Magic!" She calls from above. "I'll be right down."

As he enters, trying to locate the voice from behind a veil of gossamer silks, Conrad allows his eyes to get lost in the interior.

It's one thing to enter an establishment of magic services, and become lost in the chaotic first moments of a Mage's space. Whether in the great halls of generational guilds, or entering the hut of a hedge witch's forest domain, there was one thing all magic user's spaces shared: the organized clutter of... stuff.

The first thing to be noticed is the large, darkwood bar-style counter to one side, on top of which an antique cash register of all levers and loud, clunking buttons lie. Directly behind a counter are shelves and shelves of dried herbs, poultices, potions and various apparatus of potion making stored in varied bottles and jars. Every inch of the rafters had dried herbs or crystals hanging from them, the light streaming from high windows giving the entire building a dreamy, sparkling look. The opposite wall from the counter held books on magic, healing, potion making, spells and other study resources, next to that a shelf of candles of all shapes and sizes.

The tables scattered throughout the room held more crystals in woven baskets, bundles of dried herbs, rudimentary wands more for focus than actual magic, tea mixes, spice pouches and talismans all for sale.

The back of the space held a wall used mainly for decoration. Paintings, scrolls, maps, tapestries all hung in a cluttered mess around a heavy wooden door, currently half open and showing stairs leading up and turning, also surrounded with decor.

On the back of the door hangs a large photograph of an older woman with a sweet, smiling face of the perfect grandmother, wearing robes and a pointed hat. It doesn't take much to see a resemblance between the woman and the girl, the same freckles, cascading hair, half moon eyes when smiling and the bright green emerald of their eyes all match perfectly, and if that wasn't proof enough of relation, the girl wore the very same hat in the photo on her head.

Then, the silhouette of the woman's presence shifts, the sweet, cheerful demeanour seeming out of place as an effeminate, yet formidable body straightens above him.

And Conrad is faced with the towering presence of a half-giant with equally voluminous hair above him.

She hops from rafter to rafter and eventually swings herself down by one arm onto the boarded floor below, her boots making a soft thud.

"What can I do ya for?"

Even ground level with him, the woman towers his eyeline, his own gaze level with the peak over her overall'd bust. Somehow, a weight presses against his throat, and he can only offer a squeak of greetings.

"Little overwhelmed, eh?" She says, spinning in place as if taking in the space for the first time herself. "You're not the only one. Should've seen it when it first passed on to me, couldn't take a step without something crunching underfoot, was hell getting it all organized and into selling order. If you're just browsing that's just fine, but if you need some help on what you seek, just ask. I got a little of everything here."

Even with the distancing of her form, Conrad has to struggle with forming thoughts to words, "B-big..."

"Hm? Ah, not really. Could use more space but I was taught to use what I have, y'know?" She says with a shrug. "And couldn't let go of the space after granny passed, too much positive energy here, you felt it when you walked in, didn't you? I know you did, I see it. You want some tea? I got cookies too."

His eyes crossing from the whirlwind of sensory and emotional confusion condensed into such a short space of time, Conrad presses his glasses up to his bridge while finding focus in the offer, "I, ah... sure, thank you."

With a semblance of control, he replays the unbalanced diatribe that were their first words of introduction, and scolds himself for starting this Wager off so poorly. That fact that she overlooked his stammer, a commentary on her stature misinterpreted as an observation of her establishment, was already a blessing he could not afford to say so early in their continued acquaintance, so he finds a deep breath to focus on, and steps further into the shop, "That's very kind of you. Are you... Hilda? Or is the shop still in her name, your grandmother?"

"Nah, name's Cassandra, call me Cassie. Hilda was my Gram, may she rest." She says as she ducks behind the counter and pulls out a teapot and two cups. "Green tea? Black tea? Chai? I got it all, make custom mixes too."

She pulls out a small tripod made of cast iron and places the pot on top of it, taking a pitcher from the water barrel behind the counter and dunking it into it, pouring the water into the tea pot. She slides a small cauldron under the teapot and produces a bright red flower, tossing it into the cauldron and muttering an incantation, tapping the side of the cauldron with her finger. The flower within immediately sparks into white hot fire and the water within the pot almost immediately begins to steam.

The offering of choice goes unnoticed as he remarks on the speed of the casting, "That was... remarkably easy for you to conjure. What kind of spell component was that? Or is the cauldron enchanted, and the flower just for flavor?"

"Like that, huh?" She says smiling. "Fire lilies, Gram bred them herself, took her a couple years but it's an immediate, hot, lasting fire with no kindling. Stays lit as long as it has something to heat, finicky little guys. They won't just heat a person, they want to at least heat water but they work better with food, stews and soups and stuff. They'll start up a normal fire but won't

give you that same quick heat. Gram was a master gardener, she made all kinds of fusions. Entirely new species once or twice.”

“Wow...” lost in the potential of the discovery, it takes a full five seconds before courtesy and the pressures of social anxiety all slam back into him in a gasping jolt, and he shakes his head as he extends his hand, “... Good graces! My apologies, I come wandering into your establishment without so much as a tentative 'hello' and dance around your hospitality with deflecting inquiries. My name is Conrad...”

She laughs and it’s a rich laugh that doesn’t hold back for politeness’ sake, placing a hand over her chest as she does in what seems like an old habit. “No, no. It’s alright. No worries, I’m not offended.” She says waving her hand then grabs his, in a hard, excitable shake. “Nice to meet you, Conrad.”

As the now obviously magical teapot begins to whistle and levitate a little above its place, removing itself from the heat she releases his hand and grabs the handle carefully. “So what sort of tea do you like?”

He steps up into a barstool better suited for taller patrons, “Oolong, if it's available? I find it helps with... focus.”

“Test coming up?” She asks as she pulls out a jar with tea leaves inside it, spooning a few piles into the teapot then putting it away. “I’ve got some incense that will help with focus, too, if you’re pulling an all nighter.”

Hands in his lap, he shakes his head slowly, “No... if I stay up tonight, it won't be to study...”

Despite the brash, yet cordial nature of this 'Cassie', he has absolutely zero idea on how what could be taken as exceedingly exceptional customer hospitality could eventually turn into a request for random romance,

“Are you, ah, always so generous to your patrons?”

“Well, Gram always said that this building was a home first and it shouldn’t lose that just because we do business out of it now.” She says smiling. “I like to make everyone feel at home around me, glad I’m not freaking you out. Average customers get a little uncomfortable with all the attention.”

*And he would absolutely be one of them if it weren't for this binding Wager*, he thinks. Instead, he filters the thought into,

“Oh, you know, I was curious, and everyone deserves a chance at getting to be known, right?”

“That’s what I always thought!” She says pouring the tea for both of them and sliding the cup to him, taking out two more jars of cream and sugar. “I like talking to people but I guess I get a little...Overbearing I think is the word my mom used or maybe overwhelming, I dunno. Doesn’t matter, point is, when people are shopping they mostly just want to get in, get out and get on with their lives but that time when you slow down and really look around? That’s when life happens, not speeding from one thing to the next.”

She sighs and holds her tea cup in her hands.

“Sorry, people don’t...Come around here much. I don’t get to talk a lot. Didn’t mean to dump that on you.”



Cup in hand, Conrad blinks a few times to absorb the monologue, "I... no that's okay." He reaches for his own portions of oolong additives, "I mean, there's a bar in here, I suspect that, once upon a time, it was a busier place? Even as tucked into an alley as it's been?"

"Yeah, the city kind of...Grew around it and so it's hidden now. The only people that still come around are people that shopped here when Gram ran it." She says with a sigh. "This place has been in the Procter name since the Witch Trials, my ancestor was one of the first arrested in the trials."

This causes him to look over the rims of his glasses in surprise, "You and your grandmother have legacy in your names, wow. Legacy carries power, so you must have had some sort of benefits from that, yes?"

"The place starts bumping around Halloween, but the whole town does. I have a lot of great stories and old energy running through my magic. I got some favors from the Academy which is why, after Gram passed, I was allowed to spend my days here as long as I do my studying and go to class at night." She says smiling. "Having the Proctor name on the docket is a big deal for them."

He pauses mid sip of tea at the mention of her attendance, "You're a student, and operating a mage-serving business? I didn't even know one was allowed to even do both... I'm impressed, but not envious of your time management. I don't know how you can manage classes and running a component shop, honestly."

"Sacrificing sleep." She says smiling. "And I focus on what I'm good at. Gram used to offer charm work and stuff for people that needed it but...I'm not really good at that. I took to herbology and potion making, mostly. Gram was an all around great witch, I'm a gardner with an extra spark."

And for the first time in this whole arranged meeting, Conrad feels a spark of connection, "That's ironic. I'm trash at anything organic and fluid, but I enjoy enchanting and crafting..." He pauses, considering the risk of interruption from an outside source, and remembering the mention of her relative inactivity, decides to follow through, "May... may i show you something?"

She smiles and leans forward slightly. "What is it? Something you've made?"

Conrad slips his pack off his back into his lap, his voice hesitantly proud, "Yeah... it's a little thing, but I feel like it's one of my better works." Reaching in, he only takes a moment to pull out a wooden puzzle box, no bigger than two stacked decks of tarot cards. There's the faintest hint of hopeful approval in his eyes as he quickly solves the sliding tile sequence, and reveals a palm sized, automaton-looking mouse.

"Woah." She says excitedly, leaning down over it. "Is it an enchantment? Transfiguration?"

"Yes, and more, to the first."

Carefully removing it and setting it on the table, Cassie gets a better look at the object: toylike and cast in copper and tin, the device has simplified rodent features in its face and tail, but instead of hind legs, two cogged wheels seem to provide locomotion, while tiny pincers serve as arms. All though its outer shell, gold filigree is etched in runic patterns, and it takes another moment for her to realize that the tiny glass orbs running along its spine are modern LED lights,

"I, ah, hope you're not bothered by low level energy transference? Some consider tying the life force of simple creatures... taboo, still."

"No, he's still here just in a different body. Some of those council jerks tried to tell my Gram she couldn't make certain plants." She says smiling. "There's a lot they find taboo that has no reason to be."

The weight of judgement dissipates as Conrad turns over the mouse, showing an activation rune on its belly, "Right, yes, I had already gotten some scrutiny by making him with some modern, cosmetic materials, let alone the transference. But, anyway..." pressing the rune, life whirs into its little form as he sets it right side up again, and the eyes and runes flare up in white-blue light. The LED's cycle as if loading some spiritual developer update, and finally, the mouse squeaks in tin-y tones as its little head regards its surroundings, and its audience,

"I... call him Bert. No acronyms or deep hidden meanings, just... a silly name for a pet."

"Bert! I love it!" She says laughing. "So do you use him as a familiar or simply a companion?"

She smiles but blinks as a slight movement catches the corner of her eye and Harvey has leapt onto the counter, his eyes locked on the creature in Conrad's hands.

"Speaking of companions...Hey..." She warns, holding a hand out for the feline. "This isn't a toy, don't you dare."

There's an annoyed meow in response.

"I don't care, he's a guest. You're going to be polite."

Another meow and she rolls her eyes.

"Harvey, go upstairs." She says and there's a last small trill before Harvey turns his back on them and does as she says. "Sorry, he's a grumpy, spoiled old man."

Recovering from the start, Conrad let out a chuckle of relief, "No, that's okay actually. I made him as a toy actually, to entertain my mother's familiar back before I moved here for academy. He's actually meant to be chased, and quick enough to avoid capture." Bert, emerging from cover behind Conrad's tea mug, begins to idly explore the countertop, "Her cat eventually got tired of not being able to catch him, so I brought him with me. I haven't been able to program him for too much more than his original purpose, but I'm hoping I can augment him into other uses, like retrieving tools or assisting in fine motor detail."

She grins and follows the little creature with her eyes, enjoying the little sound of whirring issuing from it. "Well, if your mechanical mouse gets bored Harvey's getting fat and could use the exercise." She says with a laugh. "You could put magnets on him, he can at least fetch tools and stuff you drop behind a desk or something."

"That's..." his eyes unfocus at the thought, "... A really good idea." Reaching back into his bag, he retrieves a worn, leather bound sketchbook and flips it open to a half filled page, "If I use neodymium, it'll make for a strong contact without adding more metal to the head, which could interfere with the circuits and conduits. He couldn't lift heavy objects, but with better wheels, he can get more traction to drag things... but that would still only work for metal... which is still fine, since most tools are still ferrus..."

She blinks in surprise as he goes on a sort of muttering rant about designs and magnets, scribbling in his notebook. She smiles and leans forward looking over the page as he writes then up at him. He is cute, now that she's gotten past the expected politeness of customer interaction and has really looked at him. His hair is messy but not unkempt, more like a bedhead, his eyes are focused behind his glasses. He's got a charming nerd thing about him. She leans on her

hand and just regards him for a moment, enjoying the fact that an offhand remark was enough to spark a tirade. It's nice when people listen...It doesn't happen a lot.

She puts her other hand on the bar and Bert darts into it, using her hand like a tiny protective tent. She giggles and pats his tiny head. "You'll be a Swiss Army Mouse with the way he's talking about you." The lights of his eyes flicker as if blinking and she smiles.

The comment shifts his focus just enough for him to raise his eyes to hers, her Gardener's hands petting at Bert with gentle dexterity, the freckles on her cheeks high from the joyous amusement provided by its rechambered spirit.

Then they flick up to his gaze, and just for a moment, they're all he sees.

Bright, Jade green irises ringed with Amber gold and flecks of Pyrite yellow. The brim of her traditional witch's peak hat frames the case of wavy, auburn hair, and faint smears of Flora act as make-up over warm, moon-touched skin.

All of this filters into the idiedic canvas of his mind, and if he held the gaze a moment longer, he may have been able to draw her from memory alone.

But instead, a swell of adrenaline surges through his chest as he starts with a squeak rivaling Bert's, and he covers his mouth with his sketchbook,

"Terribly sorry! That was very rude of me, going off into you like that-"

She laughs and shakes her head. "I did the same thing earlier, it's okay. It's cool that you can take off on something like that. It means you actually like the stuff you're doing." She says with a shrug. "Passion will get you farther in life than intelligence, or at least it'll get you to the stuff that's important."

"P-passion?" The spike of fear doesn't recede, his mind entering Flight Mode as he slaps his sketchbook shut, "I-I need to go... s-sorry for not finishing the tea-" picking up Bert, he deactivates him with a tiny mouse-sigh, and palms him back into his box, "Pleasure to meet you, good luck with your future patronage." Slipping off the stool with a stumble, he hoists his pack to his shoulders, his pitch cracking, "B-bye."

She blinks and sits back as he stumbles off the stool. She stands and watches him, her head tilting in confusion. "I...Was it something I said?" She asks, stepping around the counter. "I didn't mean to offend you if I did. I'm sorry..."

Static buzzes all down his back and across his scalp as nerves and magic make his skin crawl in shame.

Passion? Was he taking the word beyond her intent? Could it actually be possible that a genuine connection was being made, and not another hollow flirt for his talent?

Then there was the Wager. If he left right now, defeated and spooked, then the opportunity for some peace from his roommates would be lost, and surely magnified further. The Wager didn't state any mischief they would cause in his failure, but it would absolutely be within their 'intent' to hound him for running, for prematurely ending a pleasant encounter with a woman.

A giant of a woman, no less, but a seemingly simple-mannered, good natured woman with a respectable name and obvious talents in biology.

And while this measurement of her good standing warred with his crippling desire to flee the potential of uncertainty, he stops mid aisle, gripping his packstraps and pants, closing his eyes and fighting for control,

"N-no... offense... taken. I'm just... a bit squirrely... t-they say."

"Squirrely?" She asks, cocking her head again. "Ohhh, you mean you're shy?" She smiles and steps toward him. "It's okay, I get it. I've known a couple people like that, if this is too much you can go. I just hope you'll visit again, sometime." She says smiling. "And, y'know, if you're interested; I mean, you seem super smart so you probably don't need my help, but I do some tutoring in the afternoons at the Academy. So, if you ever have an issue with a potion or something you can catch me in the greenhouse around 1 every other day. Or you can let me know if there's a better time for you and I can meet you then. Someone like you probably has a lot of homework and stuff, so I'll work with you. Closing the shop for a couple hours isn't a big deal during the day and I'm already at the Academy in the evening."

He wants to turn to her. He wants to find reassurance in her words, in her offer of understanding. He wants to look into those eyes again, and believe she forgives him for his weakness, his struggle.

And he manages to turn a quarter of the way, his eyes turned down to the planked floor, "I... did say I was trash at potions..."

"Nah, you probably just aren't being taught right. I can help if you need it, but even if you don't feel free to stop by the shop anytime." She says shrugging. "I want to see more of the stuff that you make."

The static calming a touch, he manages to raise his eyes to her waist level, "O-okay... um... when's good for you?"

She smiles. "Well, I tutor tomorrow afternoon so you can come by and ask any questions you have and show me what else you're working on. Sound good?" She asks.

His eyes raise a fraction more, to her shoulders, "The greenhouse, then?"

"Yeah, I'll see you then. And you can leave whenever you want, I won't make you stay if you get... squirrely again." She says with a chuckle.

Just for a second, he lets himself focus on her smile, the edge fading with her brightness before the weight of anxiety pulls his eyes back from her, "Sure... thank you." He turns, but adds, "Thank you... see you tomorrow."

"See you then." She smiles and lets him step out of the store with a last little ring of the bell. She steps back and looks toward the stairs where Harvey is sitting, staring at her. "What? He's nice."

Unimpressed, the feline wraps his tail around itself, a perfect picture of an overstuffed cat,

"Really? He barely survived your prattling. You weren't casting something on him to make him stay, were you?"

"Of course not! You know I'm garbage with mind charms, anyway." She says starting to clean up the teapot and cups. "I'll have you know that people find me pretty charming once they get to know me...Granted most of the people I know are octogenarian witches that were friends with my Grandma first but that doesn't matter! People like me!"

Harvey's ears swivel in place, "People like the reflection you cast from Hilda. People like your title of being the only Proctor left in the States. People-" an expertly tossed oven mitt spirals towards the passive aggressive feline as he ducks, tail flaring, "-hey! I'm monologing!"

"You're being a dick." She mutters. "People are allowed to like me, I'm not mean or rude like *some* cats I know. Not to mention he talked a lot more than I did, he got all into his work and asked questions and actually talked to me. Not *at* me like you do."

He tsks, and smoothes down his tail, "Yes well, show me someone else I can trust to run this joint, and I'll gladly give my opinion on the matter. As it stands, this place is gonna spike in the Autumn, and it'll be back to you doing mail order love potions to mid-lifers in the Midwest to make rent again. What's your bill-to-creeper-love-token ratio looking like this week, might I ask?"

She opens her mouth to counter then snaps it shut, growling as she scrubs the few dishes made by the encounter with Conrad. "I'm not arguing with you anymore, Harvey. I thought familiars were supposed to be helpful? I'm going to classes, running Gram's shop and trying my best to have a social life. What else do you want me to do?" She mutters. "I won't let this place fail, it's not my fault there's an app for candles and spellbooks, now. I'm just trying to offer some legitimacy between the love potions and if you want to keep eating the food you like you'd stop being a judgemental fleabag and do something to help."

She throws the towel into the sink and sits at the counter, beginning to wrap sage bundles for smudging.

"Any bad attitude from Gram must have transferred to you, that's your real magic as a familiar. Just a shame you came with the shop..."

He shifts his shoulders in a mocking gesture, "Yeah well, that's what you get when you get bound to a place even after your contract is up. Didn't know I was conjured up to be a generational guardian. I was hoping I'd make it to cat heaven, or cat hell, wherever the old bag went. Can't say I don't miss her though, she *actually* made my meals from scratch."

"I don't even make *my* meals from scratch, Harvey." She mutters. "We can't afford it..."

She sighs and glances out of the window.

"Hopefully Conrad mentions this place to some friends, maybe we'll get a bit more of an uptick by word of mouth." She says then looks at Harvey. "I am trying...You may have been her familiar but I was her Granddaughter, I'm doing my best to respect her wishes."

Settling down and tucking his feet into his fluff, he half blinks, "Yeah kid, I know. Let's hope your little spectrum mage does some good for us. Otherwise, this captain is going down with the ship again, and dust bunnies don't offer my company. They just... roll around, making more bunnies."

"You're not going down with the ship." She mutters then sighs. "Not alone, anyway. If it comes to that I'll find a way to release you or bind you somewhere more suitable. I'm not going to leave you alone like that again. Gram didn't mention the binding spell in the will, I thought she gave you up to someone else."

He closes his eyes fully now, settling his neck into his own floof, "Gram didn't mention a lot of things. Crafty devil, that one was, once you got past the innocent charm and baked goods laced with THC."

"Ah, yeah. Naptime brownies...Miss those." She says with a sigh. "Still haven't found her stash, I know she had one around here somewhere. I'll nick some goods from the Academy cafeteria tomorrow, okay? A full meal for both of us when I get home."

"Remember, leave the bones *in the meat*, gotta get my calcium from somewhere. Milk makes me gassy."

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The moment the door opens both twins move in unison toward Conrad.

"Oh dear, he looks upset."

"That he does. She turn you down, boyo?"

"Perhaps she doesn't prefer men? Hard to tell with her."

"Much like you, Conrad."

"So, what happened?"

His thoughts still swirling from the wave of emotional conflict, he stops just between them, still gripping his straps, "I... uh... panicked."

They blink and look at each other.

"So..."

"You didn't ask her, then?"

The grin between them is a perfect mirror, they lean forward.

"Shame, I was so hopeful for you."

"Well, no matter, we can find another fair maiden for you."

"Perhaps more of a blind date idea would be better for him."

"Yes, since he obviously can't see to it on his own."

"We're meeting at the greenhouse on campus... at 1pm. For... tutoring?" His voice turns upwards with disbelief, "She wanted me to bring more of my work... almost like she actually wanted to see me again, and had to make an excuse for me... or herself?"

He looks at each of them, "Does... that count as a date?"

They pause and exchange another glance, seeming to ponder the idea.

"Does that count?"

"Tutoring isn't exactly a date."

"Did you ask her about something? Something she could teach you?"

Stepping past them, he turns around, "Yeah... yes? I mentioned I was rubbish at herbology, and it comes pretty naturally to her. Then I showed her Bert, and she really took a shine to him..." he pauses, his eyes snapping wide, "...then I had a meltdown because we spent what seemed like an eternity staring at each other... Oh Gods, what just happened?"

"You just had a girl give you a reason to hang out again."

"You realize what that means, Lawson."

"Afraid I do, Dawson."

"You've got a date." They say in unison, smiling at him.

"Congratulations, boyo, you did it."

They both step up and clap hands on his shoulders.

"You've won the wager and you can tell us what to do for a whole week, you choose when."

"And, we'll even help you out on your little excursion, if you need it."

"Greenhouse, very romantic."

"And not stereotypical at all."

"Focused on her interests, while maintaining his own."

"Gives her a chance to shine while learning something."

"What a charmer you've turned out to be Conrad."

"Well done."

There is a simultaneous release of tension as the Wager is released, as the dread of their chaotic approval seeps into his mind, "And you swear you had no idea this would happen? That there was a single girl working in that shop? What if it was a guy? What aren't you guys telling me?"

"Well..." They both begin and smile.

"We didn't think she's your type."

"We've gone in once or twice to buy a few things."

"Sweet girl, always aiming to please."

"Seemed desperate for a bit of business and perhaps a social life."

"We thought she'd come on too strong and chase you away right quick."

"Not only that, but we thought you'd prefer someone demure, quiet, not that giantess in there. She's so broad and tall that if the friendliness didn't scare you away her height would."

"But you proved us wrong, Connie. You're full of surprises."

"You... bastards..." in a full pout now, he continues to be shoulder locked by the twins, "And yes, all of those things nearly drove me off, I just lagged mentally through the first few minutes of being in her presence mostly from the sheer societal conditioning of being polite in a business and to strangers. It wasn't until we locked gazes when my hare-brain downshifted into full fright and I nearly fell off my stool."

"They even shared a tender moment."

"Enough of one to have him panic."

"Exciting things are ahead, methinks."

"Agreed."