

Wands of Wizeria

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In a small city, in the middle of a desert, an orphan girl is a witch, and the last apprentice of the Necromantic Coven.

Her friends are witches, too.

The queen who doesn't want to be, the tekmagic golem master, and the perfect girl who wishes she could grow a beard.

Wands of Wizeria

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Episode One: Sin vs Flower

A small figure stands by a large black cauldron, stirring. On her head is an overly large brimmed hat, made of stretched and cracked leather straps. She wears a rough dress, stained by grass and roots, and tough leather boots up to her knees. Leaning against the boots is a large white cat, yowling loudly.

She stands in the middle of a desert, a dead place. In the far distance, there is a small town, but she wouldn't be in sight to anybody there. It was too far. There was her, the cauldron, and sand. Nothing else.

She pushed the cat aside, "No, you can't have any. Seriously. What is it with you thinking things that aren't food, are, lately?"

She frowned, turning to a book, and muttering under her breath. As she was distracted, the cat launched up the edge of the pot, only to be knocked backwards as a symbol appeared in the air. The cat had struck it as if it were solid. It glared up with insult as the symbol faded.

The young hedgewitch turned back, "Phantasmia organia!"

The pot instantly began boiling, and the clear liquid turned black and obviously quite thick. The witch grinned, and then stared in horror as the large spoon she had left in the pot vanished as it got pulled under.

"Crap." The witch winced, "Mothers are going to be mad with me. I don't have the pocket money to replace that."

The cat glared at her, still angry that she had prevented it from accessing the potion. Despite the fact it clearly would have dissolved him as well. Which would have been irritating to fix.

The witch muttered, raising hands over the pot, and stared as a tiny black dot pulled away from the rest and floated up between her hands. She grinned, and turned slowly, leaning out over the sand.

She dropped the gob of black liquid and grabbed the cat as it attempted to jump and claw at it. There was a fizzing sound as it hit the sand, and then a gentle fog began to emerge.

She dropped the cat, and frowned, "You smell that, Snowball?"

The cat hissed at her, and then rose up into a sitting form, and meowed out a complex set of syllables. The witch shrugged, "What do I care if you were a lord? I resurrected you. Now, you're a cat."

It attacked her boots uselessly, revealing why such a country girl wore knee high boots that belonged on someone with far superior fashion sense. She knocked him aside with irritation, and crouched, "It smells like rain. Does that mean it is working?"

Snowball sat and licked on his front paws, ignoring her.

The ground suddenly rumbled, shaking violently. The girl grabbed her hat as the wind whipped up and she giggled, stamping her feet in excitement, "It's happening! It is really happening!"

The mist was beginning to fade in some areas, revealing thick green grass, dotted with bright yellow sunflowers.

The witch danced over picking one of the flowers and grinning at it, "I did it, Snowball! I made a flower and absolutely nobody died because I did!"

"It was you!" A voice erupted accusingly, and the girl hunched up biting her fingernails. Snowball shot her a pointed look.

She turned around slowly, pulling her hat off and looking over the brim sheepishly, "Oh, hey, Kim. Fancy seeing you here. In the desert. As far from Wizz as I could get."

The witch dropped from her broom, a strange metallic contraption with handles and exhausts. Kim glared at her, “Do you know what you just did?”

The hedgewitch held out a flower. Kim looked at it blankly and then back to the witch. “Hells bells, Sin. You just blew up one of the leylines. To make flowers.”

“I did what?” She asked in surprise wide eyes staring over the brim of her hat.

Kim smiled and nodded, “Yeah. You did it this time. You’re a necromancer, Sin. You can’t make flowers. I’m going to have to call Dan to come fix this one.”

Sin launched herself forward onto her knees, grabbing Kim’s overalls, “Oh, please don’t. Dan is always so condescending.”

“She’s also an animancy. Life us her domain.” Kim replied, “I can’t exactly operate a magic workshop in a town that doesn’t have a leyline going through it. I’m a tekmancer. I can’t fix this, just like you can’t.”

Sin nodded weakly, tears forming in her eyes, “Okay. I get it. I’m useless.”

Kim sat down in front of her and spread her arms, “You’re not useless, sweetie. Who else can raise an undead army on demand to clean my shop? It’s just... You’re never going to be able to do the cute magic.”

Sin burst into tears, hugging the other witch back. She knew she was a constant problem. She didn’t mean to be. She thought that she was being helpful, undoing a desert.

“Got to say though, Sin, your godmothers will be proud. Blowing up an actual leyline? You’ve got some talent for destruction there, kiddo.”

She sat back, looking at the green she knew would have to go away, all the life she’d yanked out of the magical pipelines on the world. “Yeah. Probably. If I hadn’t completely skipped out on chores to do this.”

Kim laughed, “Yep! I can imagine them now. Brooding faces, warped and stretched shadows.”

Sin spoke in a nasally high pitch voice, “I told you not to use magic, little brat!”

Kim sighed, “You ready for Dan?”

Sin yanked her hat over her head and down passed her ears. “Is anyone?”

Kim pulled a thin metallic object from her front chest pocket and waved it in the air lazily, “Emeragus Dan!”

Red sparks shot forth, and then disappeared as the world swirled around them. An emergency signal sent on its way to the best of the apprentice witches in all the tribes. And she knew it.

Dan appeared in a rainbow of glittering sparks, hands already on her masculine hips, glaring, “What did you do this time, Sin!?”

The hedgewitch went into hiding behind Kim and her hat. She swallowed, and waved a hand, “I tried to make a flower.”

Dan glared around rubbing at her day-old fuzz on her chin. “Wow. You actually used a terraforming spell, you utter idiot. They kill entire worlds to remake them, you know. If the leyline hadn’t packed up and died, then you would have killed the world. Impressively stupid, even for you.”

“Says the girl in a man’s body!” Sin snapped, instantly regretting it. She knew that Dan had done it on purpose. That Dan failed to find a way to turn herself back on purpose. That this was the only way she could be herself without being disowned by her own godmothers.

Dan didn't cry, or get angry. She just looked over at Sin with disgust. "Kim... Get that corpsehumper out of here."

Sin bowed her head and stood up slowly. "I'm sorry."

She pulled out the gnarled branch that served as her wand and tapped her thigh with it gently. "Creepius summonae."

There was a brief screaming and howling as skeletal hands burst out of the soil and dragged her down into the ground.

She emerged, coughing up grave soil, and fell onto her back in front of the cabin in the woods. She should head inside. Hiding in her bedroom and crying felt like a nice idea.

But her godmothers were inside, and a real necromancer never cries. They let cry with curses. She didn't want to curse Dan or anyone else. She just wanted to create a pretty flower.

"Sin!" One of the crones screeched, "Where have you been? I asked you to scrap a cauldron, not fly halfway across the world!"

She pulled her hat down over her face. The old crone snatched it away, grinning at her. It was the tall one, "I got a letter from the uptight witch. You used the cauldron."

Sin blew out her cheeks, keeping herself from getting into another screaming match. She never won those. Not with the tall godmother, nor the fat or kind ones. She always regretted opening her mouth.

The crone smiled at her, "I wanted to toss it because the safety limiter had worn out. And then you go and blow out a leyline with it?"

Sin struggled to contain her anger. The old bat could have told her it was unstable garbage. She had a feeling that this had been a test and she had just failed it. They always did things like this to her.

"Nice work." The crone nodded curtly, "Especially forcing a life caster to clean up after you."

They dropped the hat, and Sin felt worse than ever.

She heard a soft meow and sat up. Snowball was in her lap. The cat gestured towards its mouth.

Episode Two: Kim vs Golem

She hung upside down by the harness, deep inside the bowels of the machine. Not literally, that would be gross. And the bowels were more of a repurposed rock crusher that could isolate and separate raw material before processing it into something more helpful.

Sweat ran down her bright-pink face, as she regretted the size of the brim on her hat. It was clamped on tightly by a chin strap, and she wasn't about to remove it just because it was uncomfortable. Besides, her mouth was full of loose screws, held gently between her teeth.

She grunted and punched the jammed wrench, eyes widening and flailing for it widely as it fell from place like it hadn't just been immovable. She missed and winced as she heard it falling away beneath her, striking and bouncing off several important and delicate parts.

"Kim! I know you're there!" A voice shouted from outside the mechanism, and she sighed, spitting the screws into her hand, "Just a minute, my queen."

"Seriously? I've been standing here waiting! You've been hiding, again!"

She pulled a stone from her pocket, the screws jumping onto it, and stuck the magnet against the side of the machine and began winding in her harness, "No, my queen. Just busy, that's all. You know how I get."

Kim emerged from the top, and flipped upright, wiping the sweat with the back of her grease-stained hand, "How can I help?"

The queen looked up, pushing up the brim of her perfectly white hat, and frowned, "Can you... Help hide me?"

Kim unstrapped, dropping onto the maintenance corridor for accessing the golem, and picked up her broom, gliding down to the factory floor. "Haven't you been here a while? Wouldn't whatever adviser have found you by now?"

Chloe smiled nervously, and pulled a vial of clear liquid from a pouch on her belt, "Cryaqua, as passed down by my mother's mother. Well, almost. I made it last a teensy bit longer."

Kim looked at the potion curiously, noting a few snowflakes inside it, "Cool. So it turns you into an ice sculpture?"

"More makes you as clear as ice." Chloe said and then sighed, "Anyways. The advisers have suitors lined up in the throne room. Again."

Kim grinned at her, "That time again?"

Chloe looked at her desperately, and Kim relented, "Fine. I guess you can have... Golem N2041!"

With the shout one of the metallic creatures lining the walls jerked forward. It lumbered over, shaking the ground, and bent down. The front of the stomach opened into a series of stairs, leading to a small seat with a series of controls around it.

Kim rubbed the side of her head, "Careful. This is a new line. They're more complicated than what you're used to. More sensitive controls, but faster to move. They're for the new rule enforcement group you said you wanted to put together."

"Law enforcement." Chloe corrected as she inelegantly climbed into the seat, her hat brim bending against the sides of the control sphere. She turned around, and smiled at her, "Thanks, Kim."

The golem closed, and then stood upright slowly. Kim dove to the side as the driver took over and it jerked towards her. She rolled her eyes as it slowly jerked out of the room and made for the city.

Chloe could have potentially teleported away, using any number of summoning spells, but most were blocked within the inner city, to reduce crime and help protect the royal family. The same royal family who was very intent on running away from her responsibilities.

One of the workers nearby put down his tools and walked over, "There's going to be hell to pay when her godmothers found out you helped her."

Kim laughed, "Hell to pay if I didn't. She's still the queen. Say, weren't you supposed to be fitting the brakes to the N2041, today?"

The worker shrugged, "Phil said to focus on the 43. It's got a test pilot tomorrow. We weren't planning on using the... The..."

The man trailed off as he slowly realised what he had done. Kim pulled a potion from her work belt and slammed it into the ground, "Teknovore!"

The ground wrapped up around her quickly, stumbling upright as she grabbed the runestones that made the emergency golem work, and she fell head over heels as she tried to sprint from the room.

The golem really wasn't meant for rapid movement, or comfort. She kept hitting her head against the runic display in front of her as she tried to navigate using it. The thing only updated once every few seconds, making it difficult to know where you were, or if there was anything in the way, like people.

She might have sent an emergency signal to Chloe, and told her of the danger, but that particular golem was designed to be immune to magic. She'd had to jury-rig a communication system using electromagnetic waves, but that system wasn't complete yet. It was what she'd been fitting to the other one when the queen had turned up in the workshop.

A red spark suddenly appeared in front of her face, and zipped beside her ear, "Always trying to do things on your own, aren't you, Kim? Well, I heard two out of control golems were rampaging downtown."

She grinned, despite herself. She would have prepared to handle this on her own, but if there was anyone who could help, then it would be Dan. She felt the magic hit the golem, and it drifted skyward for a moment as the stones rearranged, and the cockpit became roomier. A feathery pillow took shape above the console, and the screen became a three-dimensional display.

She landed, running again, and saw the trail the queen had taken. She frowned and tapped a communication button on the screen, "Dan, you hearing me?"

"Easily." The witch replied, "Looks like Chloe has realised something is wrong. She's trying to move away from the population areas."

"Can you actually see her golem? It seems to be flickering in and out, here." Kim said, hoping that she was wrong.

"Nope." Dan replied, "Seems like Cryaqua. Which is surprising, considering the anti-magic you built into that prototype. Also, I thought Cryaqua could only last a few seconds."

"Chloe improved it." Kim said, wincing, "Let's hope it isn't going to disappear altogether, anytime soon."

Dan's voice crackled, as if she were busy, "I'm holding back a few fires out here. Broken stuff, cracked buildings. The usual chaos. Can you handle bringing it to a stop?"

"Got it." Kim replied, her eyes focusing, "Thanks for the assist."

The witch's golem rounded a corner, and grabbed a building and launched over it and into the air, she spun, landing carefully between two transport golems, before continuing forward on a sprint.

She smiled as she neared it, "Almost there."

The golem tackled towards where she hoped the queen's golem was, hoping to activate the counter-measures that would also make use of an airjump, and stop the mechanism in its tracks.

She hit something, solid and heavy, but she also heard a chilling series of screams, and a rune on the display vanished. Kim let the teknovore collapse, and found herself sitting atop a flickering golem, which had opened, as if the pilot had left.

She scratched her head in confusion, and then squealed in surprise and fear as skeletal hands grabbed her and dragged her into the ground. She burst out of the ground, coughing dirt and rock, looking around in confusion.

On either side of her she saw the other witches. Chloe and Dan, who seemed just as surprised and fearful as she was. Kim looked up slowly, and saw a rug spread out on the grass, covered in cakes and drinks.

Sin waved at them excitedly, "I thought you might have forgot, so I summoned you!"

Dan stood up, glaring, "You idiot. We were dealing with an out of control golem in the middle of Wizeria!"

Sin looked at her, hurt, and then pulled her hat down, "I'm sorry. I'll send you back."

"No way!" Chloe burst out, running over and jumping onto the rug, "Suitors? I knew I'd forgot something today. Thanks, Sin."

The hedgewitch beamed at her, as Dan bristled. Kim stood up, stretching, "You know, I did stop it. We can let the other witches deal with it. As for me... Got any coffee?"

A skeleton reared up out of the ground, and spluttered, speaking hoarsely, "How... Do... You take... Your coffee?"

Kim shrugged, "Black, thank you."

"Gathered from... the ashen voids... in between the Overworld... and Underworld." The skeleton cried, and poured a metal thermos into a white porcelain cup. Kim took it gratefully, try to ignore the ick left behind by its touch and sat down on the rug with the others.

She turned and looked pointedly up at Dan, and blinked in surprise as she found her already sitting on a chair that had grown up out of the ground, covered in vines and thornless roses. Dan was pretending not to smile as she sipped her tea.

A skeleton crawled out of the ground beside her with a soulless scream, causing the witch to almost scream, and held out a small jar, "Sugar?"

Episode Three: Chloe vs Politics

She sat on the throne, and felt her heart drop as her white witches hat was snatched away, and a silver crown was placed on her head. It felt ridiculously heavy. It was. She was supposed to be the queen of the whole of Wizeria.

At the same time, she was also the last in the line of the Cryomancers. Every female in her entire family had been a cryomancer, back until her great-great-great grandmother who had invented the ice magic herself.

Her mother, and her two aunts, were her godmothers. They were supposed to be teaching her all about the family magic, to ensure that she knew it all, and was as good as they were in their day. Which was completely unattainable. Her mother alone had filled an entire library with unique spells.

The adviser sighed, and ticked an item off his schedule for the day, and looked at her, "Shall we go through the significant items that require your attention today, your highness?"

She blew a strand of her hair, "Fine."

"Item Two: A review of appropriate etiquette when speaking with members of the royal court."

Chloe sat up quickly, almost dislodging her crown, "Nope. I'm fine. I can be a perfectly well behaved lady, Adviser Khan."

He frowned, "We'll circle back to that one. Item Three: The aftermath of the golem prototype has been mostly contained, but there are a number of structures that sustained damage, and a very long series of complaints."

Chloe drummed her fingers, "... And?"

Khan shrugged, "We do not have the funds necessary to pay everyone off. Many wish to sue the crown."

Chloe smiled slowly, as a devious thought hit her, "Send invitations to Dan, and to Sin, to join us with the complainers."

"Plaintiffs." Khan corrected, "For what purpose, my queen?"

She glared at him, "I'm sorry, did I stutter?"

Khan sighed and rolled back the paper on his clipboard, and began to write a series of flourishing letters. Chloe snatched them, and pressed her clear wand into the paper, whispering quietly. She tossed the two letters in the air, "Temporalis borealis!"

The letters shrank out of sight as the world around them distorted and displaced them. It was one of her own spells, she hadn't tried it out beyond experimenting in a pocket dimension, but it should work in the real world as well. Strictly speaking, it wasn't an ice spell, or any tribe's spell. It used all of them, to some effect.

Khan sighed heavily, "Appropriate use of magic, my queen?"

She frowned, glaring at him, "You know, I have been wondering if that spell will work the same way on living flesh. I'm not sure."

The adviser said nothing more, but she could feel his continued disapproval. She wasn't supposed to be the threatening one. Cryomancers were solid and stable, and changed little over time. It was the necromancers who were supposed to be the scary ones. Not that Sin was particularly frightening.

Dan appeared in a glow of light, and bowed, "How may I assist you, my queen?"

Chloe waited, smiling, and waited some more and then sighed, looking at the still empty floor, “Dan, sorry to ask, but can you go see why Sin isn’t here yet?”

The witch spun up a globe of light in her hand, and frowned, “It appears that the hedgewitch is running from an oversized spider. I believe it swallowed your letter. Shall I fetch her?”

Chloe sighed, “Please. And stop the spider, too.”

The animancer nodded, and disappeared in another glow of light. Before it had even faded from the edge of her vision she was back, holding a shivering hedgewitch covered in spider webs and dripping with venom.

Chloe grinned, “I’ve got work for you two.”

Dan bowed her head, instantly accepting. Sin looked at her and scratched the back of her head nervously, taking off her hat, “I’m sort of busy... There’s an infestation in the lower... Areas..”

Dan rolled her eyes, “The slums. You can call them what they are, little exterminator.”

Chloe spoke up before the two could start arguing, “Kingdom is paying. And Dan did help with that spider.”

“Spiderling.” Sin corrected, shivering.

Chloe nodded to her adviser, “Bring in the... Plaintiffs.”

He bowed and moved off, and returned with a group of angry people. Most of them had come, ready to scream and shout and Chloe would do just about anything she could to avoid something like that. She got enough from her godmothers.

The queen stood, “I understand that many of you wish to file complaints against the crown, regarding the recent incident involving one of the prototype law enforcement golems.”

She held up a hand to stop the yelling, “You are entitled to do so. I am instituting two repair methods today. If you wish to drop your claim, then repairs will be expedited under the guidance of our chief animancer, Danniere. If you, however, wish to proceed with your claim, the allocation of resources will mean that repairs will be seen to with a lesser priority, under the guidance of the witch, Sin.”

The grumbling people looked from one witch to the other. From the radiant and still-attractive witch in a male body who was known to be the very best her lineage had ever produced, capable of channeling magic that few even thought was possible, to the hedgewitch with the wornout floppy hat and cat-scratched boots.

Chloe blinked in surprise as she saw the white cat purring as it rubbed up against Sin. She hadn’t seen it arrive, or felt it either. Just another weird thing that happened around her friend.

Sin smiled sweetly, “I’ll do my very best.”

Chloe stifled her giggle as the crowd erupted into a clamour of voices asking for Dan to repair their house, and dropping any claim against the crown, promising not to sue so long as the hedgewitch was kept far away.

Only one stubborn face refused. The old woman looked Sin up and down, and sneered, “Do you even know any magic?”

Sin smiled, “Yes! I’m the last of the Necromancers of Wizeria!”

“A necromancer, huh?” The old woman spat, “I guess you’re another useless dolt. I want my house fixed by the time I get back from the market.”

Sin frowned, "Where do you live, then?"

"21 Eastar Road." The old woman stated, and turned to leave. As she did, Sin jerked her wand into the air, and Chloe winced. She knew her friend always tried to overdo things, and now would be one of those times.

"Portentia potentia!" Sin yelled loudly, black smoke fuming out of her wand as she nearly drained the leyline dry. The ground around her throne room burst open, bricks thrown around wildly as skeletons began marching up and out of the Underworld.

Each marched passed Sin, greeted her, and then was sent to a foreman, who seemed to be a floating apparition of some kind. Sin beamed, proud of herself. It was a ridiculously large army to summon to repair a single house, and Chloe was questioning why Sin hadn't used it to deal with the spiders.

Dan inched over to her, and whispered, "I don't know how Sin is doing it, but there wasn't enough magic left over in the leyline to bind that many souls. That's an out of control undead army."

Chloe swallowed nervously, watching carefully, and then whispered back, "Do you get the feeling... That they know her?"

Dan looked at the witch shaking skeletal hands, and frowned, "Huh. Maybe."

Chloe nodded, "Yeah, I'm sure of it. Sin actually knows their names. I didn't realise that demonic entities had names."

"True names are used for bindings." Dan replied, "However, I have never known a demonic entity to willingly give up their true name. Sin is a mystery, as always."

Chloe laughed, "Nah. She's simple. She might be last in the necromantic line of witches, but what Sin is... Is nice."

Episode Four: Dan vs Womanhood

She was perfect.

That was the lesson that the Godmothers of the Tribe of Animancy continued to attempt to drill into her skull at every opportunity. The other apprentices attempted to reach for perfection, but Danniere had achieved it.

She did not eat in front of others, as she was perfect and was beyond the limitations of mortality. Or that was the impression it was supposed to give of.

She had no bowel movements, and that she was closeted away in intensive studies once a month was a complete coincidence and nothing at all to do with being born female.

Born female.

Transforming from one living thing to another required absolutely fantastic amounts of magic. It was ridiculous to pretend that she had accidentally accessed the raw and all powerful magic of creation itself to try and transmute herself from female to male. But, the godmothers accepted it, and continued to heap praise on her, unless anyone dared to ask if it really was an accident.

The real problem, she thought to herself as her face went bright red with effort, was that it hadn't worked.

Oh, she looked male to most people. She made sure to wear the tightest pants she could pull up without tearing, to show off the bits a girl never has. What nobody saw was the other pattern if she bent over.

She grabbed the edge of her seat, eyes watering as the clot made its way out. Followed by the extremely uncomfortable feeling that always followed. She bit her lip to stop from bursting into tears.

She had done her best to change herself. She'd rewritten her own body at an alchemical level, something nobody had ever done successfully before. Or ever, as it turned out. Instead of rewriting her makeup from female to male, she'd ended up with both. The worst of both worlds.

She couldn't cry. If she did, a spell would notify her godmothers, and they would lecture her on perfection, and force her to undertake some task. Like refusing to cry whilst watching a marathon of tragedy plays. To show no interest at all.

Like any girl on her period could fail to cry with that much raw emotion on the stage. She adored the plays, and found herself moved by them, even when she wasn't a mess of hormones. Which was never, now that she'd screwed with her alchemical nature.

She finished cleaning, hating herself even more, and waddled back to the bedroom, pausing as she detected another presence in the room. She pushed the door open slowly, forcing a total composure on herself. She entered, looking down with distaste at the witch crashed out on her bed, asleep.

Dan glared and produced her wand, poking the witch in the cheek. "For what purpose have you entered my personal space?"

Sin swatted at the wand, rolling over, "No... I don't wanna get up... You can blow it up yourself..."

What kind of people were her godmothers? Dan didn't know a lot about them, despite knowing more about everything than just about everyone. All she really knew was that everyone had thought the necromancy tribe was dead and buried, when the three had turned up to take Sin on as their apprentice.

"Do I look like a necromancer, feeble creature?"

Sin sat up quickly, blinking and rubbing her eyes, "Oh. Sorry, Dan. I guess I got tired waiting for you."

“Why are you here?” She snapped, one of her eyes bulging, “This is my room. My personal space.”

Sin smiled up at her sheepishly, “Because nobody else knows. And I thought it would be nice for you to have some company. I brought chocolates.”

Dan collapsed onto the edge of the bed, instantly regretting sitting down so quickly, and put her head in her hands, “What do you think you know, Sin?”

“I’m a necromancer.” Sin stated flatly, “Do you think your ancestors aren’t floating around here? Your grandmother is really sweet, actually. Though, she thinks cabbage leaves are the cure to everything. Which is weird.”

Dan looked up at her, “What do you know, Sin?”

The hedgewitch hid behind her hat, “That... You... Still... Sometimes... Have... Lady problems... Which means...”

Dan held up a hand, “Enough information. Have you talked to anyone about this?”

“Your grandmother, obviously.” Sin shrugged, “Your grandfather is kinda creepy and asks about it. Though, I think he’s just excited to find out if he will have a grandson. Your great aunt, Cynthia, is also a crazy gossip. Proud of it, even. Uhm... Who else? Yu, I think her name is. Elderly, cyromancer. I think she’s more of a distant great cousin or something...”

Dan rolled her eyes, “Anybody living!?”

“No.” Sin replied in surprise, as if that particular stipulation had never occurred to her. “Well, kind of? Snowball is a dead lord inside a cat’s body, after all. But he’s easy to distract if you have tuna. And he’s a cat. He can smell you... Is that why you don’t have a familiar?”

Dan sighed, relaxing, “Good... No, actually. A cyromancer cannot have a familiar. It would be an apparent weakness, unless the familiar was of an extremely rare and perfect breed, such as a unicorn.”

Sin blew her hair up, “Godmothers, right? Always in the way.”

Dan lay down on the bed tiredly, “They’re not so bad. Yours allow you free rein. You came here, right?”

“No I didn’t.” Sin laughed, “I’m in my room, studying, like a good evil witch. I did not sneak out the window, and I certainly didn’t use my wand to get here, because I’m banned from using magic for a week. For using necromancy to serve tea and cakes.”

Dan looked up at the witch as she dropped onto her bed, and smiled, “You said something about chocolate?”

Sin dropped a small cloth bag on her face, “Sorry, not much.”

Dan moved her head, dropping the bag beside her, “Animatia automatia!”

There was a squirm, and then a line of chocolates began marching up her. They paused, and then one jumped up towards her mouth. She flicked it, and heard Sin catch it. She deserved to share them.

After all, it was absolutely clear that Sin had spent every cent she had on the chocolates, which was sweet. Dan felt it melting in her mouth as one leapt into it. They were cheap. She could taste the sugar in them. They weren’t chocolate, they were confectionery.

She reached over, and squeezed Sin’s hand, trying to ignore the horrible aftertaste that she was so unused to, “Thanks for sneaking out. It is appreciated.”

Sin squeezed back, “Anything for a friend.”

Dan almost burst into tears at that. She knew she was mean to Sin. Always. Yet, here the witch was, risking the wrath of her necromantic godmothers of mythic reputation, and spending her entire pocket money on her.

She changed her mind and burst into actual tears.

Sin rolled over, kneeling and looking down at her, “Hey, Dan. What’s the matter? Did I do something wrong?”

Dan laughed, wiping her face, “No. Idiot. I’m just hormonal.”

Sin shrugged, “So we should do something. I know! Go see a play!”

The door burst open, revealing a serene woman dressed in perfect white. The edge of her hat’s brim was gold lace. She spoke quietly, without emotion, “What is the failing?”

“Of you?” Sin laughed, “Well, Cynthia says you’re a stuck up, irritating, half-rate witch, who is always picking on her great niece, and that she’ll back up your toilet and flood your bedroom if you do it again.”

Dan sat up quickly, “Forgive her, godmother.”

Sin shrugged, “I could let her tell you, herself. Bringing a ghost across the veil for a short time is dead easy.”

Her godmother looked at the room, and glared, “Tell me, daughter, why is there a necromancer inside your bedroom?”

Dan stood up, glaring, “She’s my friend, mother. You can control my destiny, you have my magic in your hands. I will learn everything you know. I eat what you tell me, when you tell me. I bathe when you say. All of my life is yours... But you are not getting rid of my friends. Especially not Sin.”

Sin scratched her head, “Must be weird having a mum for a godmother.”

The woman glared at Sin for a long time, and then frowned, and looked over at her, “Is your friend too stupid to know when she is unwanted?”

Dan smiled slowly, “Oh. You can’t banish her, can you? Animancy doesn’t work on necromancers.”

“Doesn’t it?” Sin asked in surprise, “I kind of skipped that chapter. Too many old witch names to memorise.”

Dan rolled her eyes, “No, it doesn’t. You really should actually study, sometimes. None of our magic can remotely touch you. The effects can, but nothing direct.”

Sin nodded, “Oh. That’s disappointing. I always wanted to know what it would feel like to be a bird. Guess that dream is dead.”

Her mother looked at the two of them curiously, and sighed, “I relent. You may keep this thing as a pet.”

She left, closing the door, as Dan turned to Sin in shock, “That is the first time she has ever taken anything back. Even if she didn’t acknowledge you as my equal.”

Sin picked up a chocolate, looking at it rolling around happily in her hand, “You’re amazing, Dan. I guess I’ll never know what it’s really like.”

Dan winced, “You started out as an animancer, didn’t you?”

“I killed my seeds.” Sin said, remembering.

Dan looked at the open window, “I can’t turn you into a bird... But I do have a giant flying pterodactyl. Want to -”

“Yes!” Sin interrupted, looking at her wide-eyed with excitement.

Episode Five: Sin vs Hera

She paced the bloody circle on the ground of the cave, eyes wide in the flickering candle light. She intoned slowly, meaningfully, “By darkest night, by brightest day, these three things unite. Of blood, and bone, and sinew! Stitch the universe together, bring to life where there was none!”

There was a cracking sound that deafened her, shaking the dust from the ceiling of the cave. She rubbed her ears, watching the centre of the circle carefully, as the creature stirred slowly.

A patchwork of stitches tightened slowly around the form, holding it together as it rose unnaturally, with movements that would break a human spine. The creature roared, its voice echoing in the dark cave.

Sin crouched and held out her hands as the teddy bear ran towards her. She picked it up and squeezed lightly, spinning as she grinned to the whole world. She’d done it! She made something adorable!

She shoved bear behind her as she heard the door slam open. She looked up at her godmother, that tall one. The woman looked down, “Did I hear the Forbidden Rite of the Homunculus?”

Sin nodded sheepishly, and felt an overwhelming shame as her godmother looked at her proudly, “Oh, Sin. I knew you could do it. You’re a necromancer at heart! So, show me. What dark monster did you conjure into this world?”

Sin went to pretend as if she’d failed, as if she had got some small detail of the rite wrong, but the teddy jumped upwards onto her shoulder, and swayed cutely, looking at her godmother.

The woman swayed, falling back against the door, “It’s not horrible! It’s... It’s... Adorable. Sin... What have you done?”

She pulled her hat off her head slowly, “I... Didn’t mean for you to find out...”

“Hyacinth Rasputin Artur!” Her godmother yelled as she recovered, “You will slay this beast and summon a more appropriate guardian to drag its immortal soul to the Underworld! Immediately!”

She bit her hat nervously, “... No?”

The crone drew herself upright, the shadows deepening in the room. She drew her wand slowly, and glared down at Sin, “Are you challenging me, goddaughter?”

Sin’s teeth bit through the hat. She reached up and gently removed the chunk and dropped it to the ground. She sighed, feeling her shoulders droop, and dropped the hat altogether.

She blinked back tears, “I am not killing Mr. Wumples.”

The crone smiled slowly, “Fine. So long as you can prove you deserve to make your own decisions. The time has come, goddaughter. I will fight you. If you lose, you will do as I say.”

Sin glared at her, “I don’t want to fight you. I just want a friend.”

“I am not your friend. That beast is not worthy of existing.” The crone snapped, “You are unworthy of the title of necromancer!”

The ground on either side of Sin exploded as gigantic ghouls came crawling up out of the Underworld. The hedgewitch jumped backwards, tossing a green potion from her pouch. The two ghouls reeled as the stench hit them, reminding them of being alive. The smell of dirt after rain.

Sin drew her wand, as her godmother fired a spell towards her, “Regretus Manifestus!”

The young hedgewitch blinked in surprise, and looked at the images dancing around her. “My regrets? Really? That’s it? I regret everything, godmother!”

She ignored the regrets, as she always did, and waved her own wand, “Oblivia Darkus!”

The crone knocked the curse aside, “Möbius dimensia! Is that all you can summon, little witch? Your power is nothing!”

Sin looked at her dumbly, and waved her wand, “Möbius dimensia?”

The crone spun around in surprise as the dark oblivion hit her and dragged her inside the empty pocket dimension. It was surprising to Sin too. This was far too easy. Her godmother should have known that Sin could just redirect it again.

The teddy bear ran over to her, hugging her leg excitedly. Sin shook her head, “It isn’t over yet, Mr. Wumples... What would I do...?”

She grabbed the teddy bear and jumped to the side, “Creepius summonae!”

The skeletal hands reached up and grabbed her, yanking her down into the Underworld as the pocket dimension suddenly expanded behind her. A world-destroying spell if her godmother didn’t control it.

Sin hadn’t set an endpoint when she’d used her summoning spell on herself. As far as she knew, she was the only witch to have found out what happens when you did that. One of her godmothers, the nice one, had written a lot about her theory, that a witch that did that would dissolve into the void between worlds. Sin had thought that sounded like crap.

As it turned out, she was right.

Instead of going anywhere, the skeletons dropped you off into the Underworld. A place full of creatures pissed at witches for summoning them at all times, expecting instant and complete obedience, and ripping away their self control.

Sin rolled as she hit the rough rock, and sat up, holding her head. She was dizzy. A gigantic hand held itself out to her, “Sin.”

She took it gratefully, “Hey, Beelzebub. You haven’t seen my godmother, have you?”

The demon king shrugged, “I believe she thinks you have perished, and she is now engaged in an angry and depressed debate with her sisters.”

Sin winced, “Oh. Whoops. She’s going to be so mad.”

The king sat down, smiling at her, “It can wait. It is not often that I get to converse with someone without imagining ripping their spine out through their throats. Did you bring any cupcakes?”

Sin sat in front of him, taking a breather, “No, sorry. I’d just made a living teddy bear. Godmother Hera was not very happy with me. Using necromancy for something cute like that is a teensy tiny bit absolutely massively heretical.”

Beelzebub grinned, showing off his bloodied fangs, “I would suppose so. You are an interesting witch, Sin. You have the power to create life itself from the power of death, a rare ability. Difficult. And you use it to make your life... Cuter. I think your life philosophy is fascinating.”

Sin sighed, “Sometimes... I feel like my godmothers are right. That I’m an insult to every necromancer that has gone before me.”

The demon king looked at her and shook his head, “You may be unconventional, little witch, but you are wrong. You are worthy of being named the greatest of your coven to have ever lived. You know the True Name of the King of the Underworld. Can any of your kind say the same?”

Sin smiled sheepishly, “I guess. But I’m not exactly willing to bind you, am I?”

“Then summon me.” He smiled, “I consent to be summoned as spectacle to your godmothers of your raw and terrifying power. That you are something that they should be proud of.”

“You’re sweet.” Sin smiled and shrugged, “But, no. No... I have to be me. No shortcuts on this one. But thank you.”

He nodded, “As you wish, but never call me sweet again or I will disembowel you.”

She giggled and stood up, “I’ll bring cupcakes next time. See you, Beezle.”

He growled angrily at the nickname, but the young hedgewitch didn’t notice as she waved her wand. The skeletal hands reached down from above and grabbed her, dragging her up and back into the Overworld.

She appeared in the middle of the lounge room, her three godmothers in the middle of waving wands and spells at each other, whilst Snowball screamed next to his empty food bowl.

Godmother Hera looked at her, tears in her eyes, “You’re alive?”

Sin shrugged, “Sorry. I was in the Underworld, talking to the King of Demons. He isn’t too bad, once you get to know him. Bit of a sweet tooth.”

Hera grabbed her by the shoulders, “What in the Underworld were you thinking? Firing an incomplete spell like that?”

Sin smiled at her, “That... Wasn’t the first time I’ve done that. I just wasn’t convinced that you ended up between places. It didn’t make sense. So... I did all the theory, and then I tested it. With a ghoul, first. Then Snowball.”

The cat yelled angrily. Not about what she’d just said, about the empty food bowl.

Hera nodded slowly, “You’ve been experimenting with magic that allows you safe passage to the Underworld. Where you’ve... Befriended... The King of Demons.”

The nice one, Godmother Lydia, smiled, “That’s very impressive dear. We’re quite proud of you. Angry, but proud. We will allow you to keep your stuffed bear... But I’m afraid, we have to punish you for being reckless.”

Hera glared, “Yes. You are banned from using magic for the next two weeks. And now more going out to see your friends. You are grounded. You can leave the house, but not the grounds. Is that clear?”

Sin looked down sadly, “Yes. I’m sorry.”

An ear-splitting screech hit them, and all four witches glared at the cat. He motioned a paw towards his mouth.

Episode Six: Kim vs Leyline

Dan shrugged, “So, I guess that she got grounded for using the Forbidden Rite of the Homunculus to create a teddy bear. Which makes a certain sort of sense, I guess. That magic was forbidden for its ability to create artificial sentient life. She was extremely wasteful.”

Kim was insanely jealous. Her entire reason for being was experimenting with tekmagic for creating artificial life, and Sin went and did it and even got in trouble for doing it properly. Kim had never got close to making proper artificial intelligence.

A sentient golem was something she had been theorising about for years, but had never been able to bring to fruition. All the other tekmanagers mocked her for even trying. Succeeding would break the known rules of tekmanancy. It would be an entirely new field of magic to explore.

“Kim?”

She shook her head, “Sorry, daydreaming. It sucks... But I don’t see how we can do anything, really. I don’t even know where Sin lives, do you?”

Dan’s face went bright red, “Actually... Yes?”

Kim glared, “Judging from your expression you didn’t find out by being invited over. What did you do, this time?”

“Nothing!” Dan held up her masculine hands, “I swear! It’s just... Sin was really nice to me the other day, so I let her fly my pterodactyl. She was running late, so she got me to fly her home.”

Kim blinked slowly and frowned, “Chloe has been asking for a ride on that dinosaur for two years. And you let Sin actually fly it? Just how nice was she?”

Dan sighed, “Its private. But... She stood up for me, in front of my mother, who is also my godmother.”

“Oh wow.” Kim grinned, “That’s amazing. I can see why you felt guilty.”

Dan glared at her, “I was not feeling guilty.”

“Yes, you were.” Kim laughed, “But I’ll forget about that. So, we know where Sin is. Can we actually do anything nice for her? I mean... The Necromantic Godmothers. I don’t want to give them reason to try and turn me into a zombie, do you?”

Dan smiled, “Actually, yeah, I have an idea. You know Sin’s terrible hat?”

Kim rolled her eyes, “I think she made that back when she was an animancer. It was a failed transformation project or something. But she liked it, so she kept it.”

“It got wrecked.” Dan replied, “Sin bit a chunk out of it, and then it got blown to hell in the ensuing fight with her godmother.”

Kim glared at her suspiciously, “You are remarkably well informed. How?”

“I’ve been feeding Snowball.” Dan said sheepishly, “I’m not allowed a pet... But if it is Sin’s cat, then the godmothers don’t really notice...”

Kim frowned, “You speak cat?”

“Yeah, it’s an animal.” Dan shrugged, “Quite eloquent for a cat. Snowball claims to be a lord’s soul trapped in a cat’s body by Sin... But all cats claim to be kings or princes or whatever.”

“So... You came to me to make the hat?”

Dan shook her head, "I'm making the main piece of the hat, as best as I can, but I thought it'd be really fun if we could add a little extra. Something we can all have."

Kim grinned slowly, "You want me to hook our hats up together?"

"I can't have it on my hat. The godmothers would disapprove." Dan stated, "But, a badge type thing... Technology is not my thing. I was hoping you might have ideas."

"A badge that can use the leylines as a way of transferring information..." Kim frowned, "I've got some ideas. The display in a golem is similar, but not really. Same principles."

Dan blinked.

Kim laughed, "If I'm right, this is a brand new way of using tekmagic, but it will allow us to communicate over long distances, clearly, and without the lag of the emeragus system, or the urgency."

"Like the short-distance way of talking we can use in the city?" Dan raised her eyebrow, "I thought that was limited to a distance of a couple leagues."

Kim nodded, "It is, but that's short distance. Long distance will use a completely different set of magics. It'll need more mana, too. But, if I do it right, we won't be talking. It'll be like sending letters, but you get the letter instantly."

"How instantly?" Dan asked sceptically. The tekmaner just grinned, "Tens of milliseconds."

Dan looked at her in surprise, "Are you sure you can pull that off? A few milliseconds when we're tens of leagues apart? How does that even work?"

Kim looked at her blankly, and Dan laughed and nodded, "Yeah. Fair. I'll just wait quietly in the corner as I make the rest of the hat?"

The tekmaner walked over to a bench and cleared it, the tools quickly being attracted back to their appropriate places on the wall. She opened a drawer and pulled out a series of green plates and flipped them onto the bench, and then froze up.

She knew the theory of what she wanted to do. She wanted to embed a carrier pulse inside the manastream of the local leyline, which could carry information, and be decoded by anyone who could read the pulse. But multiple pulses would wipe each other out.

She needed to find a way to make messages that hit each other strengthen each signal, rather than cancelling each other out. Which meant... She would have to invent something. No kind of thing like this had ever been done.

Resonance.

Kim smiled slowly, and pulled a chunk of copper out of another draw, pulling a careful thread out of it with her wand, and began laying out a series of square lines on the green cards.

A quick check, and she could see that the patterns were picking up and resonating with the local leyline. She grinned and grabbed a golem core from nearby, manipulating and cutting it into smaller pieces and laid it out as the base on each.

She dragged up the coding of the cores and combined it into a single view panel so that she wouldn't have to repeat herself. The base golem code was far from simple, and she'd improved it in a number of complicated ways. Most of the code was absolutely useless for what she was trying.

She ripped out all the motion sensitivity and tossed it aside, and then began the arduous task of implementing the sensor interface for what she had just built. It was mostly just math, but she hated it. Being precise was not in her nature.

“So... How is it going?”

Kim spun around, about to yell, and froze as she noticed it was dark, “Oh. Sorry. I guess I was a bit... Stuck. How did the hat go?”

Dan held out the thing from behind her back proudly, and Kim blinked in surprise, “It’s... Exactly the same. Isn’t the hat a failure, that way?”

“It was ridiculously hard to make.” Dan replied, “Duplicating a Sin failure? I went through ten. Me. Who gets everything right the first time. I even smoked out one of the labs by accident.”

Kim smiled, “I’m sure Sin will be happy. She was really attached to her hat.”

Dan waved, “So... About the upgrade?”

Kim’s shoulders slumped, “I’m... About halfway there. I think I’ve got the magic theory down. A carrier wave that naturally occurs can pass on signals in both directions, that can be encoded and passed on using the base golem code... And you have no idea what I’m talking about.”

“No.” Dan smiled, “Which feels weird. I do understand the basic golem materials, but I only really used the golem packages from the Wizeria repository. Never really dove into it.”

“I wrote them.” Kim grinned, “Happy to know they work so well with general builds. So... Can you give me... Like a day?”

“Sin’s got two weeks.” Dan shrugged, “I’m sure she’s not losing it just yet.”

Kim sighed and nodded, “Thanks... I think I’m going to burn through the night on this one. I’m pretty sure I’m close to solving it.”

Dan laughed and shrugged, “This is all over my head, which is saying something. Kim... If you get this even half working... You’re a genius. Okay. And I will call you a genius for the rest of your life.”

Kim grinned, and then turned back and winced, “Oh crap. Now I have to remember exactly where I was in all of this.”

Episode Seven: Chloe vs Populous

Her hat chirped again and she saw Khan twitch. Kim's invention was beyond amazing. Whenever she wore her hat, she could send messages back and forth to the others.

Weirdly, Dan was the one who sent the most. She wasn't the most social person, but over the Kimiko Interlink? She was a downright chatterbox.

The chirp was Dan's tone. She wanted to check the message, but removing her crown right now would probably send Khan into a screaming rage as he finally snapped.

The prince & king in front of her looked at the hat suspiciously. She smiled broadly, "A low priority message from one of the animancers who proudly serve the crown. Think of it as a letter, but transported by magic."

The king frowned, looking at her with distrust, "Do all witches of Wizeria communicate in this manner?"

She didn't like the implications of that statement. "No. It's a privileged few at the moment. The tekmancy is currently military grade, and rolling out across our defensive forces. Around two thirds of our golem drivers can now communicate in realtime."

It was a big fat lie. Kim was still trying to work out a way to get audio across the interlink without it sounding like a gerbil had eaten the sound and vomited it directly into your ear. She did want golem drivers to be able to talk over long distances, but for now it was just proximity animancy for projecting sound into the air.

The king showed a moment of hesitation. So he had come to gauge just how well Wizeria could defend itself against an attack. She wanted an excuse, now. Something to embarrass the king.

"My son is well versed in golem infrastructure." The king said with a fake smile, "He tells me that Wizerian golems are rather unique. The code that drives them is more advanced."

She nodded, "Yes. The city workshop is run by Kimiko Casimir."

The prince's eyes widened as Chloe died a little inside. She knew fandom when she saw it. The prince was one of those freaks who obsessed over another person's life. Dan had enough of those kinds following her around most days.

"The Kimiko?" He asked excitedly, "Ten time winner of the Golem Internationals? The one who posited the Casimir Test? The a golem might become sufficiently advanced as to pass as not just a humonculus but an actual person?"

Chloe shrugged, "Probably. She's our head tekmancer. Though we do supplement our defence force with several other witches. Such as Danniere de Amore, the world famous animancer. Her coven call this city home."

"Transformational magic as a defence?" The king asked dubiously. His son on the other hand grew even more excited, if that were possible.

"You've got to forgive my father. He thinks magic is a passing fad. We've only got one witch in our city, basic alchemy for coughs and colds and not much else. de Amore is the most influential and powerful witch clan in the entire world. More unique spells have been attributed to them than any other coven, ever. Father, Witch Danniere may be able to destroy an entire golem armada by herself."

Chloe couldn't help but roll her eyes, "Destroy them? Nah. That's Sin's style. Not Dan."

The prince turned to face her slowly, "I thought I'd memorised all the powerful witches, your highness.

I'm afraid I don't recognise the name. Can you tell me about her?"

"Hyacinth Rasputin Artur." Chloe said slowly, "Apprentice to the Necromantic Coven."

The king spluttered, "I wiped them out! The necromancers are dead!"

"... And?" Chloe asked, letting the entirely unfounded implication hang in the air. She had thought about it, but she didn't think Sin's godmothers were undead. Just very old.

The prince shivered, "And you are on nickname basis with a necromancer?"

"She began as an animancer." Chloe shrugged, "But as queen I can hardly ignore a witch in my own backyard who is capable of terramancy."

The prince stared at her, "Say again? I thought Artur was kicked from the animancers for failing everything."

"Necromancy is death. Animancy is life." Chloe shrugged as her hat chirped again, "As bad as Sin was at one, is the talent she has in the other. Your city can build an army of soldiers and golem, which is somewhat impressive in size... But Wizeria has the entire Underworld at her disposal."

Chloe stood up, feeling the weight of the crown on her head, "If Populous is truly planning to attack, as my spies suggest, then you have not done your study. I am the heir to the Cryomancy lineage. I could best you on my own, and turn your city into a frozen gemstone."

The king was so shocked and overloaded he dropped his decorum, "That is absolutely clear. You will have no more problems from us."

"Χλόη Μάγος!" The prince said in awe, putting two and two together. He scrambled and produced a small game card and held it out to her with shaking hands, "Can you sign my Mana, the Channeling card?"

She looked down at a picture of a huge-breasted warrior with riding a polar bear, with her own name under it in confusion. "Huh? What's this?"

The prince grinned at her like a maniac, and his father stuck a hand over his mouth, "Sorry. My son is a bit of a freak. Playing indoors with cards and fantasising over using magic, which he never could."

Chloe glared at the king, "I was talking to your son. I am a queen, show me some respect."

The king backed off, surprised. The prince smiled sheepishly, "It's a card game. You play adventures with it. There's lots of rules, and lots of story and imagination."

Chloe pulled her wand and pointed at the ground in front of her, "Iciculus tablus!"

She hunched forward, her elbows on the table, and grinned at him, "Can you teach me how to play?"

The prince looked at her in surprise, "Really? Most people think it's just a nerd thing. Something that belongs with tekmancers that never come out of their study books."

Khan coughed quietly to the side, and Chloe flicked her wand, "Imperius immobilus!"

The prince laid out a few cards, "Wow. So you really can just do any ice magic, then?"

"Cryomancy was invented by my family." Chloe said, "I can only really compare myself to them. Some of them were ridiculously powerful, and some were miraculously powerful. Next to them... I'm just a kid. But... I guess I'm a step above your average witch, sometimes. Ice has a few advantages."

"Really? It gets pretty trounced by fire in the game." He said, "Ice is strong against tekmancy and necromancy, but no one ever plays those. Animancy is pretty overpowered, but auramancy just trounces everything else."

Chloe rolled her eyes, "Let me guess, you have a card for Penny?"

The prince looked at her in surprise, “Penelope van Decker, yes. She’s supposed to be the best auramancer ever.”

“She’s annoying.” Chloe pouted, “I went up against her in the Potions Tourney last year. She always wins. And she knows it. She hardly even bothers. Last year she made a clothes-disintegrating love potion of all things. My gigantic frost spider didn’t even get a clap next to that.”

The prince pulled a card from the deck and put in front of her, “van Decker, speciality is allusion magic. Male players take a luck loss going up against her. Special move, disintegration potion.”

Chloe frowned, “I don’t know your game, but that seems way over powered.”

“Pretty much. The card is banned in competition.” The prince nodded, “But, because it only had a single printing, the card is relatively rare. I have two.”

She waved her wand, muttering as she dragged together water and ice to make a series of new cards, hardening them and crystallising them so they wouldn’t melt and let them fall into her hand. “So, then... Teach me how to play.”

Episode Eight: Dan vs Inspiration

Her fingers drifted through the air as she moved deeper into the library. She read the title of each tome as she passed. There were secrets here that had never been known, and never been revealed to any but the author.

Spells and potions, rites and curses. Every form of magic that had been explored by the coven of animancers was here. Instructions and warnings, for those willing to put their souls at risk.

Her wrist let out a quiet muted tone, and she saw a line of text appear floating in front of her. A question, from a close friend. There was great gravity to the words. It was for their purpose she was risking her life, her body and her mind by descending this deep into the Eternal Library.

“You going to compete in the Potion Tourney this year, D?”

The smiling face of Sin floated beside the question. Mocking her. There was only one witch who ever won the tournament. A sly creature who beguiled the audience and seduced their weak wills, bending them to her purpose.

Dan’s eyes narrowed as she glared at the message, considering her response. She could not allow anyone to suggest that she might be lesser than any other witch.

Her wrist pinged again, and Dan looked at the message in horror. It was not possible that any creature be so naive as this, surely?

“I signed up! It sounds like fun!”

Dan had spent her every waking moment of the past three months researching the works of her ancestors, looking for the exotic, something that could capture the hearts and minds of these fickle peoples. Yet, thus far she had failed.

The tournament was tomorrow.

Sin was expecting to enter into such a competition against the greatest minds to have ever gathered in Wizeria, without preparation at all? How could such expectant failure be enjoyable? The hedgewitch was always confusing, at times like these.

Dan spent her life in the pursuit of perfection. The idea of failure was simply untenable to her. Yet, Sin was surrounded by failure, every moment of her life. The animancer struggled to comprehend how Sin could tolerate such an existence, especially when she was so easy to smile.

She paused, looking around at her at the shelves. These countless tomes and countless ideas had yielded no worthwhile results for her. Perhaps a new approach was needed, an understanding from someone who saw the world in a different way.

“I was. But I can’t find a good idea.”

She waited, expecting something, anything. Sin rarely let a message go unanswered. It was one of the things that sometimes became aggravating about the little present that Kim had invented for her.

Dan looked around in surprise as she heard blood curdling screams, raising her wand as she looked for the threat. Many creatures got trapped within the pages of these books for being too dangerous. Now and then, one would escape.

Skeletal hands burst out of the ground in front of her, and a fireball launched from her wand, and detonated. She waved the ash from the air in front of her with a flick of her wrist, glaring.

Sin grinned stupidly from beneath her hat, “Guess I should have asked first, right?”

Dan relaxed and breathed out, shaking her head, "Sin... This is not exactly a safe place."

Sin nodded, looking around, "The Eternal Library of the Animancers. I remember getting grounded after sneaking in here once. I made it all the way down to the thousandth level before the godmother caught me."

Dan stared at her in shock, "You've managed to sneak into the Library? How?"

"I made a skeleton key." Sin shrugged, "From a rose. It was really hard back then. Not so much now."

Dan laughed, despite herself, "I guess grounding you doesn't work very well. Considering you're still grounded."

Sin held up her ankle, revealing a skeletal hand wrapped around it, "Oh, they know I'm here. I said it was for the tournament. Which it is. Just for you, not me. They're letting me compete. Not that they understand why I would want to."

Dan scratched her head, "I'm afraid I don't know why you want to compete. This is difficult, and arduous. And the other witch is going to win."

"For fun." Sin shrugged, "I get a first-person view of the potions, instead of being in the stands. I get to watch the best witches in the world compete for glory and power! For the adulation of the crowds!"

Dan stared, "You're... A fan?"

Sin went bright red, and looked down, "Kind of.."

"You used to sneak out to go to the tournament, didn't you?" Dan said, remembering, "We all thought you were sneaking off to the market for food."

"Animancers weren't allowed to watch or compete." Sin shrugged, "Until you."

Dan sighed, "No. Not me. Penelope. She insulted my godmothers, and I had to step up to prove that the potions of an animancer were superior to those of the witches of Ogrinfeld. Except I failed. Repeatedly."

"Penny is not going to win this year." Sin grinned at her, "I came to make sure of it. I already finished my potion. I can help you find your idea!"

Dan looked at her, "Really? What did you decide on, considering you don't care if you win or lose?"

"Not telling." Sin said happily, and looked around, "You're not going to find a good idea here, Dan. Good ideas are the ones that get you excited. These are just going to make you feel pressure. A good idea makes you giggle as you work, excited."

The animancer raised an eyebrow, "A... Fun idea?"

"Yep." Sin nodded, and then frowned, "What kind of magic do you find fun, Dan?"

She shrugged, "I don't think I've ever put those two concepts in the same sentence before."

Sin just stared at her, unsure of whether to laugh or be horrified. Dan checked the time, and looked back at the shocked witch and scratched her head, "Did I break you?"

Sin nodded weakly.

Dan sighed and shrugged, "I don't know... There's always just pressure to be perfect all the time. Every spell, potion, and rite has to come out flawlessly. I'm just always tense when I do magic."

Sin frowned, tapping her chin, "Except once, right?"

"No, more tense than ever, then." Dan replied, and looked down, "And it didn't even work."

Sin put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed, "I'm sorry. I knew the moment I brought it up."

Dan shook her head, “Don’t worry. I’m almost to terms with it. Almost. My once and only failure. Apart from your hat. But recreating a spell failure is an exception. Because that’s supposedly impossible.”

Sin touched her hat, “And you know I love it, right?”

Dan just smiled and nodded. If she hadn’t liked the hat then the friendship might have ended on the spot. Kim had even invented a new magic to go with it.

“You really just want to win against Penny, don’t you?”

Dan nodded, “It might not be the nicest side of me, but yes. She insulted my coven, and continues to insult us every year right before she wins.”

“She wins by sex appeal.” Sin stated, “Every time. I know you can’t sex change the judges, or the audience, but you could sabotage her somehow, right?”

Dan stared. She hadn’t actually considered nixing the appeal ever before. She’d always just tried to upstage van Decker. The idea of undercutting the other witch to give herself, or anyone else, a chance to win was... Devious. It was cruel and mean and bad.

Her face split into a huge grin, “That sounds like fun.”

Episode Nine: Sin vs the Tourney

She stood in the middle of the arena, as the crowd screamed. She couldn't hear a word that they were saying, at all. She could hear approval and disapproval, but no fan rose above any other, which was disappointing.

She could remember going hoarse as she screamed to her favourites, begging them to win, trying to let them know that she supported them, even when things went wrong for them.

Things always went wrong, even with witches of this calibre. An invite-only event, with the most skilled witches in the entire land. That being said, she wasn't sure how she managed to get an invite. She'd mentioned wanting to compete to her godmothers, who had disapproved... But the next day, an invite had arrived.

She pitied whatever town official had one of her godmothers turn up, insulted that the Coven of Necromancers had not been invited. The intimidation would have been fun for the godmother, and would have made Sin cry, probably.

The announcer's voice echoed, as he stood next to the small line of witches, "From Wizeria, we have our favoured princess of transformation!"

The cries of adulation shook her chest, and Sin looked nervously next to her, as Dan stood there, as calm as ever. The unshakeable witch of animancy looked like all of her coven. Perfectly poised, perfectly at ease, and remarkably high above you on the food chain.

"Danierre de Amore!"

The crowd went wild, stomping their feet, rattling the tins they used to drink various concoctions only mildly resembling alcohol. If you didn't want to see things for the next fortnight, you didn't drink anything that the alchemists were offering. They were here to experiment, not to serve. However, it was free.

The announcer paused looking at his parchment in confusion, "Also from Wizeria, from the lost Coven of the Necromancer, we have Hyacinth Rasputin Artur!"

Confused silence hit him, and Sin went red, looking down at her feet. She was trying desperately not to cry. She worked for a number of these people. There should be at least a few who knew her.

An ear-splitting whistle broke the air, and she looked up, and smiled as she did begin to cry. Kim was dancing on a bench all by herself, cheering her on. Beside her, Dan broke her perfect poise and waved back, "They are going to regret not cheering for you, Sin."

The announcer looked at her, "Oh. Right."

He turned back to the crowd, and projected his voice again, "Hyacinth, known as Sin to most, is the last of the Necromantic line! Show some bravery folks, lest she call up your mothers!"

Laughter and a wave of cheering briefly passed around the arena. Sin felt like her heart was about to burst out of her chest. She was terrified of the competition, now. She'd done it to get close to the other competitors, but now she felt like she had something to prove.

He moved on to the next, "Our champion of ten years, from Ogrinfeld! The auramancer who plays with our hearts, Penelope van Decker!"

The cheering hit her like a shockwave, making her feel like she could barely breathe as it moved through her chest. She wanted it to end. She felt like she was drowning beneath the screams of the crowd.

The red-headed witch twirled and blew a kiss to her adoring fans, and then made a cute pose. She was actually posing for them. Sin felt herself grinding her teeth. She'd never been a huge fan of the witch,

but she didn't hate her until that moment.

"Asvestus columbinus!" Sin snapped, her wand flying into her hand. A solid gob of darkness shot out and grabbed a hold of the gas in the air, crushing it and absorbing it before falling onto the ground with an ugly splat.

The announcer paused, "Hyacinth. Magic isn't allowed before the -"

"Sir." Dan interrupted, "Sin was simply protecting the crowd from an auran magic. She did well to spot it. It would have biased them in favour of the auramancer."

Penny turned and glared at the both of them, "Are you accusing me of cheating?"

Sin cocked her head, "No. I just stopped the spell, that's all. A potion, right? From your lipstick?"

The witch's face went white, "Oh. I guess I forgot. Thank you for noticing, Hyacinth."

"Sin." She replied, and turned back to her position, "After all, I'm a necromancer. Not a flower."

It was something her godmothers said. She didn't want to believe it. She still wanted to be able to create a flower without dooming everyone and everything for leagues around. But for today, she wasn't Sin. She was the last necromancer.

"Yes, I heard about the flower incident." Penelope stated, as if she was fighting back laughter. Sin was tempted to ask her which one, but that was just fuel for the fire.

"And finally, from distant Caerlorne, we have another newcomer, Morgana de Faye!" The announcer yelled. Newcomer, to Wizeria, maybe. Unknown like Sin? Nope. The crowd loved it. The Lady de Faye's potions were world famous. Concoctions to block out nightmares, to make the opposite sex notice you, and to heal nearly every ailment ever.

Which was odd. Morgana wasn't an animancer. She had all of these cures and crazy detailed alchemical knowledge, but she was a pyromancer. Apparently she'd been useful in some war against the undead or other in Caerlorne.

Sin felt a sudden urge to bury her face in her hat. Morgana had fought a war against things that she summoned for fun. Nothing good happened in war. It chewed people up and spat them out, as pieces of themselves.

Morgana smiled and waved, and looked at her directly. "Sin, is it?"

"Ye... YEs." She managed, half panicking. What did the witch want to say to her? Had she come to make an end of her and her coven? There were only the four of them... Maybe this was it?

"First time competing in an arena." Morgana stated, "It can be difficult. Just remember your process, and you'll be fine."

Sin smiled weakly, "Th... Thanks."

Remembering the process had never been a problem of hers. The disasters she was known for came from a very different source. One that was obvious, really. When she was a kid, just trying to master animancy, it had never worked... Because she was born to be a necromancer. Her magic was the exact opposite of living magic.

She wasn't going to have that problem, today. She had created the potion and the rite to go with it herself. This was cutting edge necromancy. Today, she would show everyone that she had the power to change the world. And she'd have fun.

The announcer spoke to the crowd, "Why don't we start with the Sinner? We've seen a touch of her magic already!"

“Sin.” She bristled, glaring at the suddenly nervous announcer, “It’s just Sin.”

He nodded, “Just trying to psych the crowd up. What do you have for us?”

Sin lifted her grass-stained dress, revealing the white cat desperately trying to chew a cork out of a beaker filled with a thick red liquid.

She picked it up, cat and all, holding up. She smiled and projected her voice the way her godmother had taught her, “Liquer obscurum!”

Snowball fell from the potion with disappointment, and began licking his leg in the way only a cat would.

Sin began to pace in a circle, holding the potion in the centre, “Ring around a rosie, a pocketful of posies, ashes, ashes, tenebrae!”

She let go, continuing to pace as the rite kept the flask afloat. Most of the audience were tuning out, assuming that such a childish rhyme could hold no power. Which was such an arrogant adult think to do. The wishes of all the children in the world were a powerful thing. That’s why leaving teeth lying around was a bad idea.

“Tenebrae! Tenebrae!” Sin repeated, and she saw the liquid darken from red, to black. She smiled and finished the rite.

“Fall!”

The sound of the flask shattering could be heard across the whole stadium. Heard, but not seen. The moment it broke the sun was snuffed out, like a giant had reached up and blown out a candle.

For a moment, all that could be heard was the heavy breathing of the audience and witches. Had they pushed the necromancer too far? Had she stolen the daylight forever?

There was a squeak of surprise, and then the light came flooding back. Sin was standing back in line, her face flushed with effort.

Penny was blinking rapidly, obviously having been caught staring at the sun when it reappeared. She looked frustrated, even angry. As if Sin had upstaged her, and they weren’t competing.

Morgana had a lazy smile on her face, as if she were more amused by what she had just witnessed than anything else. The mysterious witch from a far of city showed no other signs of concern at all.

Dan was bright red, and staring off into space, as if she’d been shocked by the sun disappearing, and hadn’t realised it was over.

The announcer swallowed nervously, “Th... There you have it folks! An alchemic rite to blot out the sun itself! Powerful? Absolutely. Practical? Who knows! Amazing? You decide!”

A blue glow lit the crowd as a golem display appeared in front of every seat, requesting a vote for or against. A small timer ticked down in Sin’s head, waiting for the score to be tallied.

The glow vanished, and a moment later someone sprinted over with a piece of paper. The announcer took it, and spoke slowly, dragging it out. “You... The people... Have chosen to award the newcomer... Six thousand one hundred and two points!”

Sin’s mouth moved sideways. Not a particularly good score. About average, really. Scaring the pants off the crowd didn’t seem to have worked. However, judging by Dan’s still vacant expression, what she had obscured with the potion had a much more influential impact.

Morgana whispered, “Having fun, then, Sin?”

She went bright red.

Penny looked between them, “What? What did I miss?”

Episode Ten: Kim vs the Tourney

She was still half in shock from the magnitude of the potion that Sin had just pulled off. She was half-waiting for people in the audience to start dying, their soul energy being needed for the rite, but it wasn't happening.

She didn't know where Sin had taken the magic, because the leylines were at their average. They often were lower during the Tourney, so the queen had her workshop injecting stored magic into them, to maintain their levels. If Sin really had taken all that magic from the leylines, the workshop wouldn't have been able to cope with it, and Kim would have got an emeragus.

The little hedgewitch might look all cute and innocent, but her mind was as devious as any around. Kim frowned, putting her chin in her hands as she looked at the stadium floor, trying to arrange the after effects of the spell. All magic had after images, things you could use to reverse engineer a spell, but she wasn't seeing any this time.

She pulled a pyramid out of her pocket and tapped it to wake it up. The device spun in a circle, and a small read out appeared on the display, scrolling. The man next to her looked, "Oh, sweet! You've got a Kimiko Analyser! How'd she make the sun vanish?"

Kim frowned, "None of this makes sense. They're necromantic ingredients... Hag's hair, cattails, blood of a vampire bat... No idea."

He gestured, "Can I take a look?"

She nearly laughed at him, but passed it over. He was a male, he had no magic. Yet, sometimes fans were obsessive about knowledge that could never be their own. Might be worth listening to, probably not."

"Half of these ingredients come out of a basic cure for vampirism." The man said slowly, "The other half, seem to be attempting to neutralise core components of the potion. Which I guess is where the rite comes in."

Kim nodded slowly, "Hey, that's not a bad idea. She raised the ghost of vampirism, to give us all a taste of the fear. That's why the sun vanished. It didn't actually disappear, we were all shrouded from it, because a vampire can't exist in sunlight."

He handed the pyramid back, "Not a bad thought. You a witch, then?"

"Kimiko Casimir, at your service." She grinned, "I'll ask Sin about it later, but she probably won't tell me if you were right. And you?"

His eyes went wide in shock and fear, "Uhm... Restus. Of Populous."

Kim grinned to herself, "Oh. Are we here in secret?"

He stared at her, "How do you know that?"

"Chloe isn't just my queen." Kim laughed, waiting for the magic scrubbers in the arena to clear up for Morgana's turn. "She let me know you sometimes go by Restus. I think she has a bit of a crush on you, to be honest."

The man went bright pink, and coughed nervously, turning his eyes back to the arena, "I wouldn't say that. Not for lack of trying, on my part. But she won't even let me win one hand... Forget I said that."

"Oh, I know about the card game." Kim moaned, "Chloe is obsessed with it, now. Thanks. Keeps trying to get the rest of us to play it. Even over the Interlink. She loves the game. Though, her crushing you at it, says she likes you."

'Restus' looked at her in confusion, "What?"

“If she let you win, it’d be because she thinks you’re not worth her time.” Kim shrugged, “She puts effort in with you, ever time. She either hates you, or likes you.”

He swallowed nervously, “Oh. Okay, then.”

Kim glared sideways at him, “No. I am not signing any cards.”

He pulled his hand from his tunic with disappointment, as she tried not to burst out laughing at him. Again. He was extremely amusing. Like a dopey little brother. What did Chloe see in him?

It wasn’t just the card game. A girls private Interlink messages were private, but any time he visited the palace, Chloe couldn’t stop talking about him. She also profusely denied that she liked him. Without anyone asking the question.

“You don’t compete in this?” He tried to break the ice again, “I would have thought the workshop foreman would receive an invite.”

Kim yawned, “Yeah, not interested, really. I only come to cheer on my friends. I’ve never been to a Tourney before. They just seem really boring to me. The Golem Championships? Heck yeah. Gigantic monsters smashing each other right in front of you. This... This is alchemy. Careful measurements. That sounds like pulling teeth.”

“You’ve won the Golem Championship almost as many times as Penelope van Decker has won the Potion Tourney.” He waved, “That’s what most people are waiting for. A chance to see her naked. It’s an insult to the real fans.”

Kim rolled her eyes.

Most people here were just here to see van Decker naked, but that included most of the obsessive fans as well. Very few could appreciate actual difficult of auramancy, because van Decker didn’t use the hard potions. She used the most effective ones. A pragmatist.

That being said, no one had ever noticed her trying to cheat before. She always blew a kiss for the fans, she even did it when she was competing for the first time. Maybe some of these fans had less control over it than they should have.

How had Sin noticed it, anyway? Auramancy played havoc with your hormones. It blinded you to its effects, which was why it was so effective. You could tell someone you were giving them a love potion, and if you got it in their mouth, they’d forget all about it.

“Lady Morgana de Faye!” The announcer shouted.

Kim clapped politely. She’d never had a need for the over-priced Lady de Faye potions she saw in the marketplace. She had no real idea what to expect from the foreigner.

‘Restus’ leaned forward, not wanting to miss a moment, “She’s a pyromancer, did you know?”

Kim blinked, “A pyro? Who is good at potions? What the frick?”

The woman wearing a black hat, and a black cape, with long black hair, stepped forward, and pulled a black looking flask from inside her clothes, and held it up for all to see, “Halcyon draco!”

She pulled the top off the flask, and drank it. There was a brief moment, and then gasps of surprise as the witch began to grow, and to change shape. She moved forward in the arena, to stop from crushing everyone, as she became a beautiful white-scaled dragon.

It circled twice, and then took into the air, and breathed blue and purple flames into the air with a terrifying roar that shook the seats. Kim was scared. She was too shocked to be scared.

“An animancer’s potion.” She said softly, “That’s... Not possible... That kind of transformation magic is inherently unstable. Managing to bind it into alchemic form... How did she do it?”

The pyramid squealed an overload warning when she tried to use it, and Kim frowned, “Protected. Weird. Though I guess, she does sell everything she makes.”

“Not these.” ‘Restus’ said quickly, “The arena potions tend to be new weapons of defence for Caerlorne. She never reveals how they’re made, or how many she can make. She hides it.”

“Dragon transformation would be a viable form of defence... Or attack.” Kim frowned, calculating how many it would take to fight her golem army, and finding that she was coming up significantly shorted than just this one.

Is this why Morgana had suddenly decided to participate in the Potion Tourney, despite five years of turning down the invitations? Or was she just being paranoid? The leylines were at their lowest, now. A magical army of defence was weakest, this day.

“I don’t think so.” He shook his head, “Caerlorne never attack first. The king there has some weird ideas. Things he calls chivalry or something. Populous have looked at them as a danger a few times, but leave them be and you’re fine.”

Kim smiled slowly, “You’ve met Chloe, right? Insulting other kings is not a stretch of the imagination.”

The prince-in-disguise laughed, and shrugged, “She’s a breath of fresh air amongst the rest of the nobles. Father is still trying to marry me off. Doesn’t want me to be the son to inherit the city. Others are polite about it, but Chloe basically told him to shove it. It was nice.”

She tossed the broken pyramid in her hand, “You like junk from famous witches, right?”

He looked at her in surprise, “Yeah?”

“Morgana burned this out.” She offered it, “No use to me. They’re easier to make than to repair. I’d just melt it down for parts.”

He took it eagerly, and held it up, “That’s amazing. Thanks!”

“It is broken.” She laughed, shaking her head. “Who do you think they’ll do next? Dan or Penelope?”

“Danniere.” The prince replied, as if it were obvious, “van Decker always wins. They’ll save her until last.”

Episode Eleven: Chloe vs the Tourney

She had missed most of the tournament. Stuck indoors with her advisers, planning something or other boring about optimum troop placements for the transmission of goods from the gates to the marketplaces.

Important, but excessively boring.

However, when the sun had suddenly gone out and all the advisers had panicked, she'd grabbed her hat and broom and launched out over the balcony, trusting in her magic to keep her upright and in the air.

The darkness hadn't lasted long, but from the sticky feeling in the air, it had to be Sin's potion. The girl hadn't told anyone what she was planning for the Tourney. Just kept saying something about it being a surprise wrapped inside another surprise.

All witches can be vague when they want to be.

It was annoying that she had missed out on seeing what Sin's potion could do, but she wasn't about to miss the rest. She leaned forward on the broom, shooting through the sky at a rapid pace, skimming around the rooftops. She knew every in and out of her city.

Which also happened to be great at avoiding every single method her advisers managed to put in place to try and track her whereabouts. So far, Kim had managed to not be sucked into building something to track her. For now.

Getting into the arena unnoticed was another thing altogether. She could hide herself easily enough, but this was an event for witches. Sneaking in to skip paying the entry fee was something often attempted, but rarely successful.

Kim had built the detection grid, and Dan had built what it activated. Statues, giants, weapons. They all looked innocent and picturesque until they were grabbing you and putting your face into the ground.

Which had all been fine until Sin had demonstrated that bypassing all of that was as easy as a trip to the Underworld and back. So a set of interdimensional barriers had been set up.

With all of that, she couldn't really think of a way in. Not without announcing that the queen had arrived, and was actively shirking her duties. Again. No, she had to be sneakier about this.

She landed the broom in an alley close to the arena. She took a quick glance over, and then flicked her wand at the ground in front of her with a whispered spell. A scale version of the arena grew out of the water in the air quickly. Showing the movement of the people inside, but more importantly, the shifting symbols of the active spells keeping everyone out.

With the large amount of magic being used inside the arena, gaps could and would appear in the shields. Not a huge gap, and she'd miss out on seeing another potion, but it was all she had.

The weakest shielding, was in the sewers. Dan had compensated with a series of living chains. Hopefully she hadn't tried too hard. After all, none of the witches liked it being a paid event in the first place.

She crushed the ice model beneath her boot, and stood up. She held out her hand, the broom snapping into it. This was going to take reflexes. She was steeling herself for the race.

She flew straight up in the air, spiralling into the clouds, gathering moisture around her and reshaping it into a dozen sharp icicles.

Then, she dropped.

Her stomach turned as the world flipped upside down, and then it hit her mouth as the broom's bristles flared and she accelerated towards the ground.

“Motivae!” She yelled, launching an ice crystal and shattering the steel sewer cap before threading the needle through the tiny shoulder-width hole. She spun to the side, grazing the surface of the water before launching down the tunnels.

A chain shot upwards out of the water with a splash, making a beeline for her. She whirled to the side, her hat grazing the edge of the sewer, but it wasn't enough. The broom shot away from her as it snagged her around her ankle, and she fell onto the walkway.

She rolled over, issuing a spell as quickly as she could, “Frigidium!”

The chain snapped where the blast of blue magic hit it, but to her horror she saw the tail of the chain immediately connect and melt into the pavement, binding her to the rough concrete.

Why did she ever think that Dan would do a halfway effort on anything? That was a stupid, stupid mistake.

“Roll the dice if you're really sure.” She muttered to herself. She was inside the detection grid now. She could use a transport spell, but that would tell every chain in the sewers exactly where to find her. She wouldn't have a moment to even exhale before they were on her again.

Of course, if she stayed put after the teleport, it might just be enough to fool the system. Kim wasn't as committed as Dan to absolute perfection. The detection grid wasn't going to deal with every single edge case, would it?

“Galcies exspiravit!” She shouted, causing a crystalline form of herself to grow into being on the opposite walkway. The figure waved at her happily, and she felt her mental link with it finish forming. Moving around with eight limbs is difficult, but possible.

She jumped the water and landed beside herself, and drew her copy of her wand, and pointed it downwards, “Speculum verto!”

She flattened herself against the wall as another chain grabbed her ice body and dragged into down onto the ground. She inched away from it slowly as the detection grid assumed that she hadn't moved at all.

She severed the link, and grabbed her broom, instantly shooting down the next corner of the sewers. The next chain found itself instantly exploding. Not just the first link, but every link. “Frigidium torquem reactionem!”

She skated around it, and jumped, tossing a vial of cryaqua against the roof. She landed, and disappeared as the liquid dripped down onto her. She had no idea if it was enough to trick the grid, but it was the only thing she could think of.

No chains attacked her.

She looked up at the sewer exit, and cursed slowly as she realised why she wasn't being attacked. Because it wasn't really an exit. It was a brick wall. She hovered up on her broom, and looked at the golem display blinking at her.

“Password >”

She brought up a message to Kim on her hat, “What's the password?”

There was a moment of nothing, and she considered sending another, when Kim finally replied, “Password? For what? Aren't you in an advisers meeting?”

“Sewer. Beneath the arena.”

“Hahahaha. You actually made it?” Kim's response came back, followed by words that she really

didn't want to hear, "I left the only copy of the passwords with the plans in the palace."

She could remember exactly where they were. Inside a manilla folder, filed away in a cabinet full of preparations for today. All the way back and out of the sewers and she probably wouldn't be able to pull off a miraculous escape a second time.

"Any other way...?"

"LOL"

Chloe twitched at that response. Maybe she should just give up and go back to being the queen. She'd already missed Sin's opening challenge. Even if her friends made it to the next round, she shouldn't be here in the first place. She was wasting time and effort to do something she shouldn't.

"If you need some motivation... Restus is sitting next to me."

Chloe stared at the message, and glared at the sealed spell above her head. It blocked dimensional shifts and jumps and wormholes and even black holes. The only way through was this little golem gate approving who she was.

On the other side, was a prince who was right now sitting with the most down to earth and cute girl that Chloe knew. Kim wouldn't make a move on him, but in all his fanboy-ish-ness, he would totally fall for her.

Chloe didn't know how much she liked him, but she did know that she did like him. She wasn't sure why. Maybe because he was quirky and weird, and she was as well. She was every bit the nerd he was, but usually in secret.

She heard a dragon roar, overhead.

Chloe grinned, that was something she could use. It might be transformation magic, but the presence of a dragon would set the detection grid off, and send everything onto high alert.

Which meant there was now an approved transportation spell to enter the arena.

"Speculum emeragus!"

Episode Twelve: Dan vs the Tourney

She was still in shock from what Sin had done. Everything she knew was upside down in her head, and suddenly she couldn't remember the simplest of spells. Every single thought went back to that moment in the dark.

She didn't know what it meant, what to do with this information. It had been absolute darkness. She didn't know if it was really Sin, but she guessed it was. It had smelled like her.

Was it simply the only way that Sin could end the darkness? Was the obscurum bound to doing something like that? Maybe Sin had just chosen her because she didn't know the others.

Maybe it was more.

Maybe Sin had actually chosen her.

She wanted Sin to have chosen her. She wanted Sin to have decided to do this spell, for this moment. She wanted what it might mean. What she knew it probably could never mean.

"Danierre?" The announcer whispered urgently at her.

She shook her head, trying to focus, and pulled a potion from her wrist. It was small, a single vial. She held it up, a glittering liquid, and smiled weakly. Her thoughts were still swirling around Sin, but that was fine. This wasn't a rite. It was a very simple potion.

A fun one.

She tossed it lightly in the air, as the crowd held their breath, and then very undramatically she removed the topper, and poured it onto the ground beside her. Nothing at all happened.

The announcer winced, "It's traditional to say the name of the potion."

She sighed, "Sorry, my throat is sore. Could you announce it for me? Amore altare."

The man turned and spoke loudly, "Behold, the amore altare!"

He paused as he said it, looking back at her in surprise, "Really?"

It was a simple potion, really. It was one used often by teenagers or first years in the academies, looking for either fun or testing their fighting fancies for each other.

You add a hair to the potion, and it would reveal the person that you loved. So Dan grinned as she plucked a hair from Penelope before she could react or run, and dropped it onto the pile.

No fan truly wanted to know who their idol loved. It hurt to see that their fragile hopes and dreams truly were ridiculous. Many fans turned into creepy and crazy stalkers, with all sorts of angry threats, the moment that their idol found someone. In the mind of the fan, no one was worthy of their idol. Laying claim could make them snap.

Penelope turned to her, looking at her fearfully, "That's not fair! That's.... An invasion! Stop it! Now!"

The announcer held up a hand, "Stop! Whilst this is unethical, it does not breach the laid out rules. You cannot interfere."

The silvery liquid bubbled and began to grow upwards in the air, spreading out into feminine legs. Dan was surprised. She hadn't realised that the auramancer leaned that way. Except, if what she remembered was true, then...

She plucked one of her own hairs and dropped it onto the mix. The potion wobbled for a moment, getting conflicting information. This wasn't the upset she wanted. She wanted to embarrass the witch, but she wouldn't condemn her to the hands of her godmothers.

Mixing two sources was supposed to destroy the potion. However, Dan was not an ordinary witch. She was an animancer of rare skill. The potion she had made might have been simple, but that did not mean that she had not imbued it with all of her talent.

The potion split into two, becoming two vaguely female forms, which immediately began to dance, holding hands and spinning. They weren't fully formed, but were approaching it.

She turned and plucked a hair from Sin, who glared at her and rubbed her head. Morgana held out one of her own hairs freely. She took them, appreciating the trust, and added them to the potion.

In a moment it had swirled into a dance of four partners, all not quite distinct, but enough that the one it belonged to would recognise the one that they cared about. The four danced in unison, as a humming sound slowly emerged from them.

The announcer stared, gobsmacked, "L... Ladies and gentlemen! Here we have a violation of magical causality!"

Technically, it was true. Also, technically, it wasn't. She had broken a rule that alchemists tended to believe, but it wasn't exactly a secret in magical circles that the rule was a best guess. She had been working on the theory that extending the effects of a potion could be done without violating the principles of mana transference by introducing emotional energy, for quite a while.

Auramancers weren't the only witches who made use of emotion. The anger of a necromancer was enough to raise the dead, with little to no mana being used. The leylines weren't the only source of power for a witch, they couldn't be.

Sin had damaged the leyline, and yet her terraforming had continued. There was only way that was possible. If magic wasn't confined only to the energy of the leyline. Emotional energy, and willpower, had to play a role.

There was nothing like the emotional energy of having the face of the one you love publicly broadcast to the entire world. She wasn't exactly feeling calm having the face of her own love spinning around in front of her. She knew some people would recognise it. Might even put it together with herself.

The frenzy of the fans in the audience, desperate to try and see who it was, to try and guess who belonged to who, was supplying more power to the potion than the anxiety of the people on stage.

She held up a hand, and uttered the dispersal trigger, "Amora cadere."

The liquid fell to the ground promptly, and she turned to the crowd and curtsied politely. The fans exploded into cheering. Most wouldn't fully comprehend what she had done. She probably would not be winning the vote, this time.

She had intended to embarrass Penelope, but she had seen the fear on the witch's face. The girl liked another girl, and that would mean instant expulsion, with all of her magical ability stripped away. Dan did not yet hate the girl enough to ruin her entire life for the sake of a competition.

The magical community would be divided, expecting that what she had done was some kind of illusion, that she had lied or tricked her way to this result. Experiments to recreate it would fail, because it lacked the fever of the arena's crowd. This level of emotional intensity was rare, in day to day life.

The potion itself had to be the focus. That could not happen in clean environmental conditions. Not with such awesome curiosity. Dan would likely be called a fraud after this, and her explanation would not sit well.

Her godmothers would likely punish her for allowing the family name to be further tainted.

The announcer held up the piece of paper, "The votes have been tallied! You, the people... Have given

our princess of magic... Ten thousand and three points!”

Dan winced.

She had never before scored so low. It was more than Sin, but less than Morgana. She would make it to the next round. Unless Penelope did something drastically wrong, then it would be Sin eliminated from the competition.

Dan would have to up her game if she were to stay in the competition.

The next round would be harder, it always was. Whilst you could do any potion combined with any other magic in the first round, the second was purely potions with direct contact events, and a demonstration on a hapless animal.

The announcer turned, “And now... The moment you have all been waiting for... Our champion of so many years... Unopposed master of potions... Penelope van Decker!”

The redhead stepped forward, smiled at the crowd, “I forfeit.”

Dan glared at her, “No, you bloody well do not!”

Penelope look at her in surprise, “I thought you -”

“I am beating you on even terms.” Dan snapped, “Just because I chose not to embarrass you does not mean you get to back out of this. You forfeiting doesn’t mean I beat you, and I will. For the Animancy Coven.”

Penelope swallowed nervously, “I... Can’t beat you. Not this year. You rewrote magic. I didn’t think that was possible. Potions is my study! Not yours. How did you know you could do it? I know you didn’t cheat. The potion was too simple for that.”

“Emotional energy.” Dan waved a hand, “But you are not backing out of this. Fight me, fair and square!”

The announcer laughed, projecting, “It seems the fight is hotting up, ladies and gentlemen! How about we give our beloved star some encouragement to stick around?”

The crowd instantly began chanting her name. For the first time since Dan had met her, she saw her look nervous and blush. She had witnessed neither before. What was she worried about? She always relied on her auramancy. The crowd was psyched up enough that a half-naked woman would get their attention, even if Sin had blocked an unfair advantage.

Penelope winced, “Fine... Uh... This is my world-famous Amor bilem!”

Episode Thirteen: Sin vs the Tourney II

“Amor bilem!”

Sin screwed up her nose. Love bile. An infectious, noxious substance. Penny really was world-famous for it. She used it as a weapon. Infecting attacking armies and forcing them to become obsessed with her. Using it on a crowd of innocent onlookers was cruel.

It was no different than if Sin turned the entire audience into a bunch of zombies and forced them to vote for her. Which, in retrospect, would have been what her godmothers wanted her to do.

The witch tossed the flask lightly, allowing it to shatter in the middle of the arena. It took a moment for the green gas to spread out, attacking the senses.

Sin felt it deeply. Felt it attacking her emotions, trying to twist her every thought towards Penny. She latched onto her anger at the use of the alchemical substance, at the unfairness of it, stoking her hatred.

Love and hatred were not so far apart. The spell could not force hatred to become love, or vice versa. Hatred was the path of resistance.

As things were, Sin was clearly going to be eliminated. And she was well known for causing disasters or breaking rules. So she smiled, and then she horrified the entire audience, as she flicked her wrist, “Portentia potentia!”

The dead marched up out of the ground, howling first in pain, and then in adoration. Corpse after corpse ran over and threw themselves at the feet of the auromantic witch.

Penny panicked, revolted. She started to run, and the zombie army, which was still emerging from the Underworld, sprinted after her, screaming professions of love. The hideous display of littered and falling limbs, and the thing that they were falling from, had the effect.

Love turned to hate, and the crowd began to boo.

The announcer screeched, “Disregard this unfair display! Penelope van Decker is automatically protected for this round! Sin is eliminated!”

The necromancer smiled, as the announcer glared at her, “Dismiss this! Now!”

“Can’t.” Sin shrugged, “The moment that fog hit them, they became hers. Only Penny can send them back to the Underworld. Though, she’d have to stop running first.”

The announcer pulled at his hair, “Why in the Underworld did we allow you to compete!?”

Dan coughed politely, and the announcer turned and spoke irately, “Yes, princess of magic?”

“Sin did catch van Decker attempting to cheat, earlier.” She shrugged, “It would be wise not to call the competition into question, would it not?”

His shoulders slumped, “If she can make the monsters go away, they can both make it to the next round. But! No more interfering!”

Sin bounced over to where Penny was running and grinned at her, “You know why they’re following you, right?”

“Because they’re obsessed!” The witch snapped, “This is horrible! How could you do this to me!?”

“Tell them to go back to the Underworld, then.” Sin smiled, “You’re in command.”

Penny stared at her, “No. Too scared.”

“I can’t make them.” Sin laughed, “Only you. So... Can we face your fear? I can hold your hand.”

Penny glared at her, and Sin blinked, "That's a no to hand holding."

The witch slowed down, shivering as the army began to surround her in a circle, falling to their knees and pledging their undying allegiance, "You weren't just being mean? Offering to hold my hand?"

"It helps me." Sin shrugged, and the witch shook her head, "First you torture me, and now this?"

Sin giggled, "I might have got a little dose of the bile."

Penny sighed, "Oh. Of course a necromancer would be able to resist. You hate everything."

Sin blinked back tears, and the auromancer paused, "What? I thought necromancers were supposed to bury their emotions beneath hate and anger?"

"I'm not a very good necromancer." Sin bit her lip, "Godmothers tell me I'm too nice. I like being nice."

Penny sighed, and breathed out slowly, facing her adoring undead fans, "Please, return to your world below."

The creatures immediately burrowed into the ground, vanishing without so much as a howl. Penny fell to her knees, fighting back her own tears, and Sin crouched, "I like flowers. I wish I knew how to make them. That's why I'm a bad necromancer. Why do you pretend to be a good auramancer?"

Penny looked up at her in fear, "You noticed?"

"Premade jibber jabber." Sin glared at her, "You don't make the auromancy potions yourself. You cheat. But, you do know potion making. I want to see you actually make something. That'd be fun."

Penny laughed slowly, "How do you do it, Hyacinth? You saw the auramancer's kiss. You realised my potions weren't made by me. How? No one else has ever noticed."

"Sin." She growled, and then sat down next to the shaken witch, "I'm a necromancer. I see dead people. And dead people always see you. Like your mum."

Penny went white as a sheet, "My mother is here?"

"I can help you see her, if you want." Sin said, holding out a hand. Penny took it cautiously, and gasped as she stared around, "There's so many... I thought ghosts were rare. Unfinished business."

Sin laughed, "You know those regrets that you remember ten years later that keep you up at night? Yeah. So do dead people."

A particular white and formless blob moved in front of them, and down and into the ground so that it was at eye level. Sin waved happily, "Hello, Mrs. D."

The ghost waved back with a formless hand and then turned to the frightened witch, and it glowed pink, "I... Proud... Always... Be... Self..."

Penny swallowed nervously, "Why do I know it's her? Even though... Are you messing with my mind?"

"Nope." Sin replied, "No idea how to do illusions. Check my connection to the leylines, if you want. I'm just channelling myself. I'm a necromancer. This is what I do."

Penny sighed, "I know. It's just... Surprising. I thought I'd know her by her face, not the feeling of her soul."

The witch looked at the ghost, "Thank you. I will do what I can to make you proud."

Sin let go, and stood up, brushing herself down, "Now... I think that Dan just negotiated me back into the competition. Which is a problem for me."

Penny laughed at her, “You didn’t make a potion for the next round, did you? You just made that darkness spell?”

“Obscuring spell, but yeah.” Sin nodded, “So I think I’ll use my bathroom break to try and whip something up. Not that there are many ingredients around here, and summoning spells are broken outside the arena floor.”

Penny frowned, “So... Any hints what you’ll try? Considering I need to?”

“Kim is in the stands.” Sin waved, “She’ll probably have an ingredient or two for you. Just shoot her an emeragus. She won’t mind.”

The auramancer stood up, looking at her in confusion, “You were so mean to me. Now you’re being extraordinarily nice. I don’t get you.”

Sin shrugged, “If you do, you do. If you don’t, you don’t. I don’t mind either way. I’m me. You, be you. For once.”

Penny nodded slowly.

Episode Fourteen: Kim vs the Tourney II

Chloe collapsed beside her, coated head to tail in various substances. Ash, grease and slime composed the most of them. The tail was also somewhat surprising, and extremely scaly and gross.

The prince beside her pretended not to notice and bowed his head, “Χλόη.”

The queen shook her head, threatening to throw goop from her waist-length hair, “I’m not supposed to be here, either.”

Kim sighed, shaking her head, “I figured this might happen. Here.”

She held out a metallic cube, with various inset lines suggesting the presence of several smaller cubes within it. Chloe took it gratefully, and it vibrated, and began listing out the contaminants that it had found.

Kim reached over and hit the skip and clean rune. There was a brief flash, and bubbles floated up around the queen. She hiccuped, releasing more bubbles. She handed the cube back, and rubbed her face, “That... Hic... Feels better.”

Kim looked at the prince, “Wanna swap seats?”

‘Restus’ looked embarrassed, “Uh... Not if... I don’t want to inconvenience...”

“I am not being the third wheel in between the two of you.” Kim snapped, standing up, “Shift it, prince boy.”

He shuffled over, red faced, and she sat down again, looking at the empty arena intently as the two shyly greeted each other. It was clear as angels that the two wanted more than they had, but they weren’t about to reach out and take it.

Kim tossed a piece of popping corn into her mouth, “So, you two kissed yet?”

She felt the glare from Chloe immediately, and wondered if the ice queen could make her catch on fire. However, she’d planted the thought in both their heads now. Maybe they’d stop acting like there was nothing going on.

“We’re... Just friends...” The prince stammered.

Kim rolled her eyes, “Right. And I’m just a mechanic.”

“Speaking of, did you have to put a three guess limit on the access hatches?” The queen asked, glowering.

Kim grinned, “Of course. Can’t have anyone trying to brute force their way in using tekmancy.”

“I thought you didn’t care if people broke in.” Chloe said accusingly. Kim looked over at her innocently, “I don’t, but I was hired to do a job. I always do my best.”

Truth be told, she had thought about intentionally sabotaging her efforts, so that determined people could sneak into the overpriced arena. She couldn’t afford her own seat, it was part of the payment for protecting it.

However, the moment she heard that Chloe was going to be busy and was supposed to be elsewhere during the Tourney, she knew that she had to put in a bit of effort. That the results would be utterly hilarious. Like the tail.

“Sure.” Chloe said, not buying it, and looked back, “So, who is your favourite to win, Sammeth?”

The prince swallowed, “Uh... Things are different. Usually Penelope van Decker. But she and Hya... Sin, seem to have talked. Also, Sin summoned an undead army to chase her when she biled the audience.”

Chloe laughed, "That's our Sin. So... She's out?"

"Not yet." Kim interjected, trying to stay part of the conversation. "Sin caught van Decker trying to cheat in the introductions. But I guess the next round will be different. I don't think Sin actually has a potion, and necromancy ingredients aren't exactly easy to come by."

"van Decker asked Kimiko for ingredients, earlier." Sammeth said, "Which is a bit of a surprise."

Chloe looked over at her, "And you gave them to her?"

Kim shrugged, "She wouldn't have asked me if it wasn't Sin's idea. Maybe the girl is trying to be a little more of a witch."

The queen nodded slowly, "Still. She tried to cheat."

"She also got chased by an undead army, professing their love." Kim grinned, "Hilarious as crap. Nobody like Sin to lighten the mood. The competition is more fun than I remember."

Chloe nodded, "So... Is that Morgana? What is she like?"

"She turned herself into a dragon." Sammeth said in awe, "I haven't seen magic like that before. It'd be a new card."

Kim shivered at the reference to Mana, the Channelling. Chloe looked curiously down at the foreign witch, "A dragon? I wasn't aware that kind of transformation could be bound to a potion. What kind?"

"She drank it." Kim replied, "I don't think anyone knew it was possible. A new weapon for Caerlorne, perhaps. A threat that this is what you face if you attack them."

"No sweat, Kim." Chloe replied smoothly, "I invited Morgana. Personally. We're not about to pick a fight with them."

Kim glanced over, "Politics?"

"Yes." Chloe nodded, "Sorry, can't tell even you. Secrets being what they are."

"Eager to escape." The prince mused, and then made it nerdy, "Secrets Stash, card 104."

"106." Chloe corrected him absent-mindedly, causing him to pull out and shuffle his deck to find the appropriate card as Kim just rolled her eyes. The prince had completely corrupted the queen.

It wouldn't be long before she would be forced to play a hand, and have to memorise all the rules and pretend to be more creative than she was. She could handle making golems. She didn't like games. She didn't see the point in them. Not when she could build two giant machines and get them to tear each other apart. Or dance Populous Opera. However she was feeling that day.

"I'd say that Morgana has a shot of beating Penelope for the win." Kim said slowly, "She's going more for the awe and wonder, rather than the enrapture, but it could work. Especially if Penelope has been cheating and is now out of her comfort zone."

Chloe shook her head, "I wouldn't bet on it. Penny may have been cheating, but she isn't an idiot. She actually does know a crapload about potions. She might just have been hiding that she's a better tekmaner than she is an auramaner. You know what godmothers are like."

The prince looked at his cards like they had betrayed him. Chloe nudged him, "Am I a hot-air-balloon breasted polar-bear riding monster of destruction?"

"Uh..."

Chloe glared at him, and he swallowed, "Trap card activated."

Kim burst out laughing, "Yeah, you called for that one."

The queen rolled her eyes and then grabbed her popping corn, and tossed a handful in her mouth, munching angrily. Kim raised an eyebrow, and metallic legs grew out of the popping corn container, and it wrested itself free and ran back to her lap.

Kim laughed, "Told you it would come in handy, 'Restus'."

Sammeth just seemed to be trying to fold in on himself and pretend he didn't exist. Which was probably a decent self-preservation instinct. Being stuck between two friends trying to prod and poke each other was not exactly a safe position.

Chloe looked at her, "When did you hex up the legs on the container?"

"When you sent me a ping." Kim replied, "I knew you were going to eat all of mine. Get your own."

Chloe looked down, sadly, "I can't. They'll notice that I'm not supposed to be here."

The prince stood up quickly, "I shall purchase some for you! Tell me your heart's desire."

"Overplaying." Kim stated, and Chloe looked at him suspiciously, "You're not getting anything out of this."

He shrugged, "That's nothing new. Come on, what do you want?"

"Popping corn and pigskin." Chloe stated petulantly, as if he might refuse her. He was surprised by the second request, it wasn't exactly a royal staple, but he didn't argue.

Sammeth bowed, "It shall be so."

As he ran off, Kim laughed, "If they're not sold out."

He stumbled.

Episode Fifteen: Chloe vs the Tourney II

She glared at her friend, "Could you stop flirting with the prince, please?"

Kim shrugged, "I thought you weren't interested in him."

"So you are flirting!" She snapped, "You admit it!"

"Nope." Kim said drily, looking over at her with a thousand-step-stare, "But I guess you do like him, don't you?"

Chloe looked down, pouting. She shouldn't have to put up with accusations like that. She was the queen of the city. Kimiko needed to show her the proper respect. She could take away her workshop at an instant. Hand it over to a more respectful witch.

All the same, Kim was still the best at what she did. The agonising process of breaking in had proven that without a shadow of a doubt. The tekmancer was ridiculously good at what she did.

Chloe sighed heavily, looking up at the clouds, "You can be a total witch at times."

"Yep." Kim replied flatly, offering no apology at all.

The queen glared at her, and then smiled slowly, "I'm being one, aren't I?"

"Yes." Kim growled, and glared at her, "I'm really not interested in your boyfriend. Or anyone, for that matter. Why is that so hard to understand? I didn't choose this seat. You did. You sat me next to him."

"Sorry." Chloe said quickly, "I... Guess I got jealous. I don't know, Kim. I don't know why I get jealous around him. I don't like other people getting his attention, but when he gives me his... It feels awkward."

Kim laughed, "He's got a few rough edges that you don't like. Like being totally obsessive about that game. You're into it, too, but you don't come across as a total weirdo all the time."

Chloe smiled, "I guess."

"That doesn't mean he's a lost cause." The tekmancer reassured her, "It just means that he's a work in progress. Maybe that's more interesting than the perfect princes that turn up at your doorstep once a month."

Chloe went red, and swallowed, "Umm... Kim...?"

"What?" The tekmancy snapped, and Chloe shuffled closer to her, "I've got a project I've wanted to ask you about for a while. You just reminded me."

Kim raised an eyebrow, waiting expectantly. And Chloe sighed and whispered in her ear. The tekmancer went red, and looked back at her, "I... I've never even thought about something for that."

"Give it some thought?" Chloe asked, shifting uncomfortably, "Sitting on my throne, with the princes parading themselves, at that time... It's more like soup. It isn't fun."

Kim raised her hands, "TMI. Seriously. I'll toss some ideas at a wall and see what sticks, okay? It might be possible to control it a bit better. Why don't you just tell your advisers to schedule it a week later?"

"Khan is in charge of that stuff." Chloe replied, "I'm not... Comfortable... Telling him."

"I could."

Chloe glared at her, "No. Seriously, no. I think he actually likes hearing."

"Gross." Kim shivered, "I'd fire him."

“Can’t.” Chloe blew a hair on her head, “The advisers have half the power of the crown. Until they’re convinced I know what I’m doing. That’s the way... My parents left it.”

There was a painful memory. Both her parents had died when she was still little. She’d got the crown long before she knew if she even wanted it. She knew she didn’t, today. She wanted to be a witch, first. Unfortunately, she wasn’t going to give up the throne to Khan. He’d ruin not just Wizeria, but the whole world. He was not as politically aware as he thought he was.

He’d give up Wizeria to Populous, who would immediately attack Caerlorne, and the world around them would suffer. He didn’t know to fear war, not yet. He thought it was a solution to economic and social strife.

Kim elbowed her, “Cheer up. Us girls stick together. I thought you’d figured that one out by now. We might argue and pull hair, but we’re always there for each other.”

Chloe grinned, “I wonder if Sin would get someone to haunt his bedroom?”

“Don’t mention it.” Kim replied, “Ever. She might take you seriously.”

“Such a cutie.” Chloe agreed, “I have no idea how she can be so naive. When she has tea with the King of the Underworld. Surely she has to know some of the bad in the world, right?”

“No idea.” Kim shook her head, “Sin’s been through some stuff. Getting turfed by the animancers. Living on the street, before her godmothers found her. You’d think she would think the worst of people. Maybe she just rejects it. I don’t know why she’s so trusting.”

Chloe frowned, “I don’t know. It doesn’t feel like an act. Sin really does trust everyone. Which doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“She’s kind.”

They looked up at the prince, who held out his treasured items to the queen, who took them eagerly. She bit into the pigskin in bread, her toes curling. She was never allowed things like this. They weren’t proper for a lady.

Sammeth sat down next to her, and smiled, “Sin is kind. I know many look down on the hedgewitch, for taking care of the lower parts of the city, but she chooses to. Whilst necromancy probably wouldn’t be accepted in the higher parts, she could be using her magic to reap the fields where no one can see, or running mercenary armies. I bet she’s got offers to kill off various nobles.”

Chloe thought about it slowly, and nodded, “Sin could pretty much break through any and all magical defences. She’s got the know how. Friends in low places. But she is dirt poor.”

“Being poor doesn’t matter to a necromancer.” Kim stated, “No one even knows if her godmothers are alive or dead. I bet they’d be happy if Sin stole her food. She could take whatever she wanted. Only Dan would really be able to stop her.”

The prince nodded, “That spell she used on van Decker. That is one of the most powerful known spells of necromancy. The ability to summon an army off the cuff like that... I don’t know how she has any magic left. You can’t just keep drawing from the leyline, right?”

Chloe nodded, “Yeah. We’ve all got a daily limit. Exhaustion kicks in. I don’t think I’ve seen Sin ever hit her limit. You, Kim?”

“Not even when she burst the leyline.” Kim said slowly, “She’s creepy powerful. I don’t think Sin realises it, though. She always looks up to you and Dan. Treats me as an equal, but I’ve worked hard to make that happen. She just thinks of herself as the little orphan girl.”

The prince shifted uncomfortably, "This is awkward... But do you know if Sin's last name is her parents? Artur?"

Chloe glared at him, "Seriously? You think she's...?"

He nodded, "It fits."

Kim looked at the two of them, "Politics?"

Chloe sighed heavily, "It isn't secret. There was a family, a long time ago, called Artur, after their ancestor. The original Artur was a boy who became a king. He was an orphan, no one knows who his parents were. Artur the First founded Caerlorne. Supposedly, he was a boy with magic. Granted by the Faye, the Fair People."

Kim smiled, "I've heard lots of legends of boy witches. None of them ever turn out to be true."

Chloe smiled at her, "Yeah. Most of them have their origin with Artur. I've never met a Faye, but I know someone who actually has."

Kim looked down at the arena, the idea hitting her like a lightning bolt, "Morgana."

"Morgana de Faye." Chloe nodded slowly, "She was an orphan, too. A street kid in Caerlorne, which is not as bad an experience as Wizeria. A lot of my social reforms mimic that city. They're richer, so they can afford to do more. However, at a young age, Morgana vanished. She was dragged under the water, in front of several palace guards."

Sammeth spoke quietly, "Populous isn't exactly forthcoming, but we confirmed it as well. Morgana was raised by the Fair People. She's a witch, like you, but she wasn't raised by humans. She knows their magic. Ancient magic."

Kim looked at the both of them, "Did Morgana come at your invitation? Or did she come to meet Sin?"

"I can't tell you that." Chloe reiterated, which was a confirmation.

She wasn't going to keep that from her friend. Morgana had come to confirm if Sin was born of the ancient and powerful Arturian line. A line of kings and queens who had all exhibited miraculous abilities, far beyond what any witch should have been capable of.

Blessed by the Faye.

The original Artur may or may not be a legend. However, items attributed to him had repeatedly been confirmed to be magical items of ridiculous power. His sword was necromantic, capable of killing a soldier and turning them into an enslaved zombie at the same time. His cape was mildly tekmanic, capable of redirecting electric attacks. His shield was pyromantic. The list went on and on.

If Sin really was an Artur, then her blood might be the key to controlling these items that attacked anyone unworthy of picking them up. She might be the key to a city becoming powerful enough to conquer a neighbour, without fear of reprisal. Any counterattack would fall flat if the weapons of Artur were put back onto the battlefield.

Sin might be a danger to them all.

Not that it would really be news if she were.

Episode Sixteen: Dan vs the Tourney II

All the competitors had been given a few minutes to take a break, and prepare themselves for the pure potion round. As far as she could tell, Morgana was the only one confident in her work.

Penelope was furiously breaking down a handful of tekmagic components, looking to create hers from scratch. The woman was sweating, but smiling. Whatever Sin had said to her had improved the witch's attitude considerably. Maybe Dan wouldn't have to hate her one day.

As for Sin herself, she was leaning back in a chair, ankles crossed and feet on a table, sipping apple juice as a nearby skeleton was grinding down his own arm. As expected, the witch didn't look the bit concerned that she hadn't even begun to prepare, despite only having a couple minutes left.

Dan was looking at her own potion and wondering if she wanted to use it. It wasn't something that was usually her style. She'd prepared it only to undercut van Decker, who seemed intent on going off on her own tangent.

Morgana walked over to her, "You live in this city, do you not?"

"Yes." Dan replied, not looking up, "What are you interested in?"

"Sin."

Dan looked sideways at the lazy necromancer, "Why not ask? She's an open book."

"Her lineage is my interest. There are few with access to the Eternal Library and the genealogies that it contains." Morgana replied, "You could grant me access."

"Nope." Dan replied, finally looking up, "My godmothers are not likely to grant access to anyone. I am not supposed to go down there often. Though, you could ask Sin. Apparently she knows how to break in without setting off the alarms or security system."

Morgana smiled, "Interesting. She's an odd sort of witch, isn't she?"

Dan nodded slowly, "I consider her a friend."

"My godmother has banned me from approaching her." Morgana sighed, "I already am in trouble for speaking to her."

"Godmother, single? Why?"

Morgana nodded, "Yes, just the one. I'm a bit of a peculiarity. My godmother is convinced that Sin is the heir to some big thing. Can't say much. She could be, from what I've seen. But it would be hard work."

Dan laughed, "If you make it look hard, Sin will find a lazy way to do it. Or just make it look disturbingly easy. She could win this Tourney, if she tried. She invented both the potion and the rite she used in the first round."

Morgana smiled, a small and cheeky thing, "A woman after my own heart."

Dan froze up, remembering. And remembering that Morgana had spoken as if she'd seen in the absolute darkness.

The witch noticed, and smiled, "Piercing Gaze, I call it. Being able to see to the heart of any matter. A magical ability, like your ability to see water in the air. Uses no mana, and can't be switched off once awoken."

Dan glared at her, "Sounds irritating."

"Not so much." Morgana replied.

“For me.”

The witch grinned at her, “Maybe. Private things are private. I have no desire to speak of them. I learned that well as a child.”

“Time’s up!” The announcer called.

Dan put her potion away with frustration. She didn’t have a choice. She would have to use it as it was.

Sin stood up, and swept the bonemeal into her apple juice, capped the bottle and shook it up. Dan had no idea what she was planning, but it seemed there actually was a plan. Though juice and bonemeal didn’t seem much of a potion.

Penelope on the other hand seemed to have a well thought-out plan. The potion sparkled and crackled with tekmagic. Hopefully it was not as impressive as it seemed, or the witch would probably win. Again.

She would not be defeated by the witch. She had, however, been completely distracted by Morgana. Maybe that was the aim, to knock her sideways. The witch didn’t exactly exude kindness. A sort of impishness, maybe. Like she was planning on yanking out your seat the moment you tried to sit on it.

The suggestion that Sin was a descendent of Artur himself was obvious, but it didn’t make sense. The family name of his would have changed a dozen times since then. Sin’s family name might not even be a family name. Her middle name was probably a moniker given to her the moment someone realised she had magical ability.

None of her names were likely to mean a single thing. Hyacinth certainly didn’t. It was Dan’s own mother who gave it to her. She didn’t like the name that Sin had been born to. Selene.

Dan didn’t know if the other names were changed. Knowing her mother, they were. Her mother hated everyone, and everything. She hated the imperfections that came with the real world. She wouldn’t let a thing like Sin maintain her existence.

The legend of Artur, the wizard, was old. It was little more than a fable at this point. More than one or two of her own family members had attempted to uncover the origin. To find Artur, would be to find the magic of the Faye, a magic that dwarfed every witch in history.

However, that couldn’t be Morgana’s reasoning. She already knew of Faye magic. It wasn’t entirely clear if they had taught any of it to the foreigner, but she could find it without resorting to myths and legends.

A single godmother. They might be a witch, or one of the Fair People. Either way, uncovering Morgana’s motivation in studying her friend would not be possible without finding a way to understand the one who had sent her. Who forbid interaction with Sin.

Of course. Sin was a necromancer. She would be able to summon and quiz her own ancestors. It was possible Morgana’s talk with Dan had been meant to be overheard by Sin, to encourage her to discover the answer, when Morgana was forbidden from telling her.

The noise of the crowd hit her as she stepped into the arena. Loud, and excited. Nobody had been eliminated yet, which either meant a surprise bonus round, or double eliminations. The latter was far more likely, given the lack of ingredients in the arena.

Dan took her place, waiting for the crowd to calm down and let the announcer speak.

She wasn’t having fun anymore.

Morgana posed a direct threat to someone she cared about. This whole competition was now a barely

veiled threat. The witch had shown herself to be an extremely powerful animancer, maybe even Dan's equal.

If Morgana's next potion was a threat to Chloe or Sin, then Dan would have to decide whether she was willing to risk a diplomatic incident and her own freedom to protect the people she held dear.

She would probably be thrown out of her coven, and disowned by her mother if it came to that.

Silver linings.

"Let me refresh your minds!" The announcer yelled, "Sin, of Wizeria, stands at six thousand one hundred and two points!"

There was a small smattering of applause. It seemed that Sin's antics had begun to form her a group of people who liked her. It was hard to resist the charm of the little hedgewitch. She looked innocent, but her magic tended towards the incomprehensible.

"Penelope van Decker, of Ogrinfeld, after the interference of Sin, has been awarded ten thousand points!" The announcer screamed.

Fair. It was less than she would have earned with her potion, but she had been caught trying to cheat. It also put her above Sin, and within shouting distance of the other two. She could still easily win this.

"Danierre de Amore, of Wizeria, stunned us all by rewriting magical theory! For this, she earned ten thousand and three points!"

From the way he put it, she deserved far more. She hadn't impressed enough people. She hadn't tried to play the crowd. She had made the same mistake she had made every time for the last five years. The mistake that had always let Penelope beat her. It might, again. Every point would matter.

"Morgana de Faye, our distant friend from Caerlorne, wowed us by using a potion to transform into that most mystical of creatures, the dragon! In doing so, she earned twelve thousand, eight hundred and three points! You adore this witch!" The announcer yelled, as the crowd whipped into a frenzy.

Morgana was a threat to them all. The competition, and the real world. Dan could not let her live.

Episode Seventeen: Sin vs the Tourney III

“Any more incidents, and you’re out. No questions.” The announcer whispered to her, “And good luck ever getting an invitation again, unless you manage to win. Is that clear?”

Sin looked at him innocently, “Really? Okay.”

He shook his head, not believing that he had got through to her. In a way, he hadn’t. She had just been in this for the fun. To do what she had to Dan, and to stand here and watch all the potion masters up close.

Dan had rewritten magical rules. Morgana had turned into a freaking dragon. And Penelope, even if she had interfered, had nearly enslaved an entire arena of people to her will. Every single one of them had earned the title of potion master.

She, on the other hand, probably hadn’t.

“And now! For the start of round two!” The announcer projected his voice, “First up, our very own... Sin!”

Some people actually applauded. For her. All she had done was a simple illusion, born out of fear of death. It wasn’t anything that impressive. It might have tricked a few into thinking it was something special, simply because they had never seen a necromancer’s magic before.

She held up her bottle, and smiled timidly. She had no idea what to call it. It was a simple two-ingredient potion. It barely deserved to be called a potion. “This is... Bonemeal and apple juice?”

The crowd immediately began to boo.

The announcer looked at her, “Seriously? It doesn’t even have a name? Is that actually a magical potion?”

“Absolutely.” Sin replied, “To both.”

She flicked the bottle once, and then a second time. Then she tossed it aside, and turned away, not looking as it crashed to the ground. Not looking as the entire arena shook, as the crowd screamed in terror.

She turned around slowly, crossing her arms as she saw the scene. Saw the ghouls and skeletons crawling out of every surface of the building, screaming and grasping for the living.

The tentacles reaching out from the Underworld, questing for living flesh. To take it, crush it and destroy it. The horror rising from where her apple juice had fallen. A horror like nothing else. The sun refused to shine on it.

It had no static form, no physicality that could be described in the meager dimensions that could be perceived by the human mind. The mind of a witch was worse. It existed as magic, and as the ethereal. Yet even there, it could not be seen fully. Nothing of this creature belonged in this world.

The audience screamed, some trying to gouge out their own eyes as they saw the creature in front of them. Something that they were not worthy to see. Something they were not insane enough to comprehend.

Sin waved to it, smiling, “Hello, Beezle.”

The announcer was on his knees, simultaneously crying and wetting himself in horror. “What... is... it?”

“The King of the Underworld.” Sin smiled proudly, “A close friend of mine. He can be merciful, if you show him respect.”

The announcer looked at her, “You summoned... The King... Of the Underworld? Are you insane?”

“Some say so.” Sin nodded, and then turned, “Beezle, I think they’ve had enough. Can you reverse it on the way out?”

The creature bowed to her, and the shadows evaporated. The tentacles turned to ash. The skeletons squealed as they were dragged back to the Underworld. The ghouls howled as they exploded.

The damage the audience had done to themselves was undone. Bloodied skin faded like a bad memory. Injuries evaporated into the air, as if they had never been there in the first place. Pee, vomit and all the disgusting things that happened when true fear hit, disappeared slowly, as if melting away.

The entire arena took a ragged breath inward, feeling shaken to their core. They had born witness to something that was not for mortal eyes. They had seen a witch use a tiny potion, that could barely even be called that, and it had summoned something that their minds were so horrified by it was already burying it below layers of psychosis.

Sin spoke loudly, “Do not vote against me.”

The announcer scabbled to his feet, as the blue light of the golem displays appeared in front of the crowd. As her threat penetrated their skulls. As each of them looked at the witch in the funny hat and tried to comprehend why they feared her beyond anything they had feared in their lives.

Few of them would even be able to recall why they were afraid of her. None of them would be able to agree on what they had just seen, unless they were a witch themselves.

Those witches, who had seen what she had done, would be even more terrified of her. Because they would know that what she had done wasn’t a potion. It was an invitation. Technically a potion, but only barely.

Invitations could only be made to creatures that you had made a contract with. Things that you knew the True Name of. Things that you could control with a whisper, and a command. So the witches knew, they all knew, that she could command the entirety of the Underworld, through their king.

Most of the witches would vote against her, out of fear.

She didn’t care, one way or the other. She was just making this up as she went along. She hadn’t prepared a second potion, because she never expected to get as far as this. Fear wasn’t what she wanted to use, really. She’d love to make cupcakes, but she figured that would just go badly.

She had been going to just forfeit, and went to find some snacks, when she found the bottle of apple juice. The idea had just sort of bubbled up in her mind. It wasn’t as cruel as all that. Nobody would remember any of it in just a few minutes. Their minds would replace the fear with just an uncomfortable feeling and a blank spot.

“This doesn’t count as an incident, does it?” Sin asked, “I didn’t break any of the rules.”

The announcer looked at her, as if he thought she looked as strange and otherworldly as her friend had, “... No. I guess it doesn’t.”

The assistant ran out with the votes in their hand, passing it to him. He looked down and back up, “You’re kidding me. Check the system. Maybe she fritzed it.”

“We have Kimiko herself look it over.” The assistant whispered, “Apparently she was in the stands. There’s no margin for error. The vote is accurate.”

The announcer rolled her eyes, “Yeah, right.”

Sin tapped his shoulder, and pointed, and then waved as she got the witch’s attention. “That’s Kim.”

The announcer raised an eyebrow, "How would a hedgewitch like you possibly know?"

"Back off." Dan snapped angrily, "Just because she made you wet yourself. She is a friend of Kimiko, and of Χλόη. I count her among my friends. How could you possibly know what circles a witch travels in?"

The man swallowed nervously, looking over at Dan in surprise, "Sorry, Lady de Amore."

Morgana interrupted, "That's the wrong person to be apologising to. You irritated a necromancer. Do you enjoy the prospect of death? Keep sidelining her."

"Stop it." Sin stomped her foot, "I don't care. People always treat me like this. You even treated me like it, Dan."

Dan nodded, accepting her friend's judgement without apology. She would feel justified in her actions, as always. It was as irritating as ever, too. The superiority of the Animancy Coven was as strong in her as ever.

Morgana was a surprise, however. She knew the witch was fun, but she wasn't naive, either. She had heard them talking about her. That witch thought she was some long lost something or other.

Not likely.

She hung out with demons and ghost and ghouls. If she was a long lost anything, they probably would have told her by now. The benefit of having friends in extremely low places.

She hated it when people felt the need to protect her. She wasn't a nothing. She was as far from incapable of defending herself as she could be. Her godmothers might be cruel at times, but they certainly hadn't raised her to be weak.

The announcer projected his voice, "Sin has achieved a record-breaking score of twenty thousand points! Every single one of you voted for her!"

The crowd reaction was mixed. As if they could hardly believe that they had voted for her. Most of them wouldn't understand it, and for a few they wouldn't even remember voting. But she didn't doubt the result. Not if Kim had double-checked it.

Maybe meet the King of the Underworld was a bigger shock to the system than she'd thought. She'd expected at least a few witches would vote against her. Instead, she was stuck in the competition.

How the heck was she going to top this in the next round?

It was supposed to be the hardest. They'd had the open round, where anything vaguely alchemic could pass, and the simple round where it had to be just a potion. The next round, usually the final round, was the compound round.

Two innocent and simple potions tossed together to form something unique and amazing.

It would take a miracle for her to be able to complete two in the short break. She just had to hope the others did well enough to eliminate her.

Episode Eighteen: Kim vs the Tourney III

Kim sat down next to the couple again, and breathed a sigh of relief. “They thought the system was broken.”

“More like the people.” Chloe laughed, “I can’t believe she actually did that to us. Summoning him of all creatures.”

Kim laughed, “You know he’s her friend, right? She probably thought it was no big deal. Like introducing your friends to that celebrity queen you might know.”

The prince looked at the both of them, “Why are you acting so casual? That... That... If she can bind him, which she obviously can, then she could destroy the entire city!”

“She nearly does that without trying.” Kim laughed, “Sin’s just cute. She has no idea what is and isn’t creepy for the rest of us. Seriously. If Sin wanted to be a threat, she would be... But she doesn’t.”

He winced, “A witch of Populous would be put on a tight leash.”

“Maybe that’s why you only have the one.” Chloe retorted, and glared at him, “You seem to be forgetting that I am a witch. We don’t treat people like tools just because they have magic.”

“Next up, we have the amazing Penelope van Decker!”

Kim grinned to herself, leaning forward. “She made a tekmanic potion. I’ve never even heard of her touching anything but auramancy. What about the nerdsquad?”

Chloe just elbowed her, but apparently the prince didn’t care or didn’t notice the insult. “No, I don’t think anyone has. In fact, none of her products are even remotely out of that field. Everything she has ever released is firmly inside her school of magic.”

Chloe and Kim looked at each other knowingly, “Godmothers.”

“What? Did I miss something?”

The girls rolled their eyes at the same time, and Chloe looked down at him, “Sorry, you wouldn’t understand. Just a thing of how things are.”

Kim smiled and shrugged, “Just a witch thing. Let it go. Unless you want to hear a dozen sob stories. And grow to hate a lot about how we’re raised.”

“I guess learning magic isn’t easy.” The prince said, completely missing the mark. Kim had it better than most. Her godmothers had done nothing but encourage her tinkering and blowing things up. They still did.

Tekmancers tended to be earthy people. They didn’t care about tradition or culture or expectations. Even bad tekmancy, if it worked, it was good enough. Half the machines in the world were held together with spit, effort and hope. It wasn’t a great situation, but if it worked, it worked.

Elegant approaches often took a backstep when there was actual work to be done.

However, everything about Penelope van Decker was elegant. The angle she wore her hat, the colour scheme, the way she held herself. She knew that was the center of the spotlight, and she loved it.

“I present, the nanovore!”

Kim’s eyes shot open, “No frickin’ way.”

She ignored the other two looking to her. She was not missing a single moment. Not if van Decker believed that, with a few spare parts, she had managed to create something that Kim had been working her entire life towards.

The witch swallowed the potion, and a small glow began to surround her. Kim grabbed a cube from inside her robe and began typing on it furiously reading and extrapolating every single thing that her sensors could pick up.

“Instability.” She muttered to herself, “Allowing the... Collapsing... Waveforms... Rising... Missing interface... Resonance...”

“Kim.” Chloe snapped, “The hell is she glowing for?”

The witch kept looking at her readouts on the small cube, “She’s in a ’vore. A golem. I don’t know if she’s pulled it off. It’s supposed to be skin tight, but as tough as a teknovore.”

Chloe spoke softly to herself, “A skin tight golem. Unimpeded view of the world. That would be... Significant.”

“I’ve only been trying for half my life to invent the nanovore.” Kim muttered, “If it were this easy, it’d be done. She’s close... But she doesn’t have the interface locked.”

Chloe frowned, “Usually a ’vore deactivates when you don’t get a lock, right?”

“No.” Kim shook her head, glaring at the scene in front of her, “That’s a safety feature that I built into the golem base code. Except that thing down there isn’t using my base code, because it can’t.”

The prince coughed, “I’m afraid I don’t know what happens if... The interface doesn’t lock?”

“Interface locking is where the controls of the golem are given to the pilot.” Kim said with irritation, “In a teknovore, it’s when your runes flash, because the runes and the ’vore resonate. They become part of the same thing. A golem is a living thing. Right now, that golem is wrapped around its pilot... But she’s not in control of it yet.”

“Threat assessment.” Chloe said standing up slowly and drawing her wand.

Kim kept tapping away on the cube, looking at the readouts, “If it stays inside the barrier, minimal. If it tries to escape the arena, critical. van Decker has about thirty seconds to achieve resonance, or the golem will develop its own mind and purpose, at which point, it might kill her to achieve what it wants.”

“Aren’t golems supposedly serial killers in the old legends?” The prince asked nervously.

“Nothing so emotional.” Kim shook her head, “Their goals are the same as their base code. A nanovore, and this is guessing, probably seeks to replicate itself. Because it’s a bunch of tiny machines working together at a molecular level.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

Kim smiled grimly, “You don’t get something for nothing. To be able to create more of themselves, they’ll pull apart the air and ground around them, turning everything into the raw materials they need. They’ll eat the city. As they grow in number, the process will accelerate.”

“Can she get it under control?” Chloe insisted.

Kim finished typing, looking at her display.

“Kim!”

“No.”

“Imperius immobilus!” Chloe yelled, the ice shooting out of her wand and striking the figure in the arena. The queen rushed forward on her broom, not waiting to see if her spell even had any effect.

Kim flipped the cube in her hand, and it expanded and slammed into the ground, spikes emerging from its suddenly much larger sides. She turned to the prince, “Make sure no one touches this. I need it if

I'm going to help."

Then she held up a hand and her broom dropped from the sky. She grabbed a handle and swung onto it, "Emeragus Dan!"

The red sparks shot towards the scene, as she pulled the display down on her hat, and began to highlight areas of the arena in front of her. She could pick up the electrical decay of the teknovores already spreading rapidly.

She could see most of the other witches already responding. Some were beginning to evacuate the arena, working on crowd control. A few were looking to step in and help. Kim fired off emeragus at them, telling them to back off.

She and hers could handle this, and if she couldn't, then everyone was better off running anyway. Containment was the goal. She needed to take the magical containment grid around the arena and make it smaller. It wouldn't fully contain the nanovores, but it would slow them down.

There was a jerk on her broom, and she glanced back to see the witch in all-black sitting behind her. Morgana looked at her seriously, "I can get you an interface to the 'vore. Can you shut it down?"

Kim shrugged, "Maybe."

"Circle higher." Morgana commanded.

Episode Nineteen: Chloe vs the Tourney III

Morgana and Kim were doing something, and it was irritating the 'vore. The sparkling light of their presence kept swarming up towards the two of them, diverted only by Dan's fast reactions with simple blocking spells.

Things like this always happened at the Tourney.

Someone would get overly cocky, and try to pull off a miracle without the safe environment to do it in, and then everything would go sideways. This was why she had so many people on the ground with experience. The rest of the city might not have the protection of the very best, might even be vulnerable to attack.

No one was ever stupid enough to attack and let whatever was going wrong in the Tourney escape and destroy the city they were so interested in seizing. Well, not yet, anyway. Underestimating human stupidity was the downfall of... Anybody who ever had a taste of power.

The months following the end of the Tourney weren't much better, amateur witches trying to prove that they had what it takes to do what they'd seen demonstrated. Which absolutely none of them had.

Underworld, some of them might even try to create the nanovores. Which appeared to easy, considering how dangerous they were proving.

Sin looked up from where she had been sitting and thinking, "So, they work by eating things, right?"

Chloe flicked off another spell, trying to keep it contained, "Yes, and? What's your insane idea, Sin? Before you try it!"

She was too late with the last word.

"Oblivia darkus!" Sin shouted, her wand sparking with shadows as she held it over her head.

Chloe raised an eyebrow, looking over at Sin. Nothing obvious had happened. She'd felt the leyline fluctuate, as if something truly magical was going off, so Sin had to have done something. Which probably meant she had caused an ever worse disaster.

Sin stood up, "So, we just need to find everyone, and then I can port us out."

Chloe frowned, "Wait. Did you just banish the entire arena to a dark oblivion?"

Sin nodded excitedly and Chloe winced, "Oh for... How long do we have before this place collapses?"

Sin looked at her blankly.

"Pocket dimensions don't last forever!" Chloe yelled, "We have a lot of people to evacuate!"

"My wardrobe is about a hundred and eighty years old." Sin shrugged.

Chloe scratched her head, "You've lost me."

"My wardrobe." Sin said slowly, "It was hexed, with oblivia darkus. To make it easier to... Store things."

Chloe looked at her in surprise, "A necromancer used a dark oblivion as a walk-in?"

Sin laughed, "No... More like that one drawer you always forget to clean. I remember once a year or so."

Chloe actually couldn't relate to that at all. Every drawer in her wardrobe got cleaned daily. Even the embarrassing one. The servant who forgot would probably end up getting fired. But, she did get the point that a dark oblivion could be anchored.

“What did you anchor us to?”

Sin shrugged, “Snowball.”

Using a living thing as an anchor shouldn’t be possible, but there was a chance the cat actually wasn’t alive to begin with. Which was a disturbing thought that Chloe didn’t want to focus on.

“Dan, you hear the plan?”

The sweating witch just shouted at them angrily, “Do it already!”

Chloe moved over to the stands, and began gathering the crowd towards her, “Form an orderly line!”

Meanwhile, Sin sketched out a quick circle in the soil, and then stood in the centre of it. Chloe brought ten or so people over and Sin grinned at them, “Please step to the side if you have night terrors or believe you may be prone to them. We’re arranging alternate transport for you.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. Of course whatever Sin was planning was nightmare inducing or sensitive to nightmares in a nightmare-inducing way. She just pretended not to notice. It was easier to live with yourself if you didn’t acknowledge that Sin was a walking night terror.

“First, some safety tips. Keep yours hands inside the circle at all times, and shut your eyes unless you want them to bleed into your brain.” Sin smiled sweetly. The people in the circle looked around warily and the witch grinned, drawing her wand, “Alright, off we go! *Trepidatio vectio!*”

Chloe shielded her eyes as the group vanished in a flash of hellflame. She smiled and turned, “Next ten, over here. Same question as the last lot. If you have night terrors, or think you might, step over there. We’ll help you out in a moment.”

She hoped that they would.

Whatever Kim was doing was slowing down the spread of the light bugs, but it wasn’t stopping them. They were still multiplying, and the swarms were moving faster, and with greater unity. Spreading out an attacking at multiple angles.

She really wished they could talk to Penelope, and find out what the witch had possibly been thinking, but at this point, it looked like they were probably going to have to leave her behind, just to escape intact.

Sin popped back up in the middle of the circle with a grin, “Okay! Next lot!”

Chloe wasn’t listening as Sin repeated her speel, and then vanished. Her ability was as disturbing as ever. Yanking that many people between two dimensions, one only bound by a small thread to a moving feline, would take everything that Chloe had. The little hedgewitch who killed flowers just by touching them, who had tea with the King of the Underworld, and brought teddy bears to life, was a power that she didn’t know if she’d appropriately threat assessed.

Everyone had always treated Dan like she was the unequivocal most powerful witch in the city. She was the leading apprentice for Animancy Coven. A coven that Sin had started out in, and been a total disaster. Couldn’t pull off even basic spells. So everyone expected her to be a failure.

She wasn’t a failure. She was a disaster. Her godmothers hadn’t decided to try and bring her into the Necromancy Coven because Sin was a failure at magic. It was because Sin always had the spark of necromancy in her.

The animancy godmothers should have known that.

A problem for another time.

“Off we go, *trepidatio vectio!*”

Chloe spun and lashed out, “Imperius immobilus!”

The swarm buzzed for a moment, hesitating. It was long enough for her to do what needed to be done. The queen wasn’t a queen today. Right now, she was a witch. The witch that represented a long line of cryomancy, and a heck of a lot of power, was here.

“Cryomurus!” The spell snapped out, freezing the water in the air into a solid wall. An unbreakable wall. She waved her wand, growing it out in all directions, bending it overhead and sealing the arena away as the bugs attacked. They might be able to chew through the ice, but it would take them time.

Kim’s voice ripped through the arena, loud and clear, “Tofu burrito!”

Chloe looked up at her in confusion, and then she saw the blinking lights beginning to fall to the ground slowly, and smiled slowly. So the tekmaner had actually been doing something as she floated up there.

That was something, but it was wiser to let lie and evacuate, all the same. With the arena in oblivion, however, they would have to postpone the remainder of the Tourney.

Obviously, Penelope had been eliminated. If the organisers weren’t willing to say it, she would be willing to issue an edict. As well as a letter of encouragement. Perhaps, with Kim’s guidance, Penelope could help push the boundaries of tekmagic.

“Yay! I’m back!” Sin shouted, “Who is next to step through the mysteries that lie beyond death?”

Evacuating would take forever if Sin was allowed to keep talking.

Episode Twenty: Dan vs Mood

She was lying on her bed. Maybe she was moping. She certainly wasn't feeling happy. Confused, slightly angry, extremely irritated, and just a little bit in the mood to make someone or something suffer.

The open textbook lay on her desk, positioned at just the right angle, beside her notebook. Two pens, a highlighter, and an eraser were also at the ready. There was text written halfway down the page in a flowing, but legible, script.

She couldn't study. Her mind felt like someone had sucked all the energy out of it and farted some confusing emotions back in. Emotions that she didn't even understand why she was feeling. They weren't connected to any memories or thoughts. They just sat there, like hovering ghosts or billious toads.

She was demotivated, and not understanding herself just made her feel even more frustrated. She couldn't focus on study, or spellmaking. The only thing she seemed to have the energy to do was lie in bed, eating crisps and hating herself for eating.

The hate was real.

It had been building for a long time. She didn't know when it started, but she did know that she truly, and utterly, hated herself. She hated the way she looked. She hated how she pretended to be perfect for her godmothers. She hated herself for smiling when her friends spoke to her. She hated the fact that she was breathing.

She also hated that she knew her godmothers knew she hated herself, and did nothing about it. She tried to pass it off. That maybe they didn't know how to help. Or maybe this was supposed to be another of their tests. It didn't matter to her. They were as useless as she was.

"Shut up, shut up!" An urgent whisper sounded from nearby. Dan sat up in surprise, looking around to see who had caught her wallowing in her self-despair, when a flying ball of fur and claws launched at her face from the window sill.

"Imperius immobilus!" Dan whipped out her wand, catching on her bag of chips and scattering them, crumbs and salt across her entire room. The feline was caught mid-leap, confusion on its face as it thunked to the ground as a solid brick of ice.

A well-worn boot stepped onto the window sill, and Dan sighed in frustration and sheathed her wand, "I assume this thing is yours?"

Sin grinned, crouching on the sill and holding onto her hat, "Sorry. Snowball is misbehaving. I think he got jealous after all the attention everyone else got at the Tourney."

Dan shrugged, "Take it on your way out. I have some cleaning to do."

Sin sat down, her legs dangling into the room, "What?"

"I told you to go." Dan snapped, nearly bursting into tears. The hedgewitch cocked her head, looking at her, and bit her lip, fighting back her own torrent of emotions.

Dan looked away before she caved, "I just want to be alone."

"No, you don't." Sin's voice came out angrily, "You want to hurt. Just to feel something that is anything."

Dan spun back to her, "I am better off alone!"

Sin matched her glare, a tear running down her grimey face, "I'm staying. Whether you want me to or not."

“Fine.” Dan shook her head and raised her wand to teleport, when a blast of magic hit it, “Vectio!”

She glared at Sin, absolutely incensed, looking as the witch shoved Dan’s wand down her top, “No. You don’t get to run away.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, Hyacinth!” Dan screamed at her.

Sin took off her hat and placed it deliberately on the study table, and then crossed her arms. Dan felt herself fuming, about to explode. She didn’t want Sin to be the one she laid into, but the witch was certainly asking for it. If she didn’t give her wand back, and piss off, then Dan would unleash horrors the like of which the Underworld had never known.

“Ba’al!” Dan commanded, summoning her bound demon by its true name. It appeared in a flash of blue light and white smoke. The creature had to morph its physical form just to fit in the room, mostly muscle and tusks.

She pointed, “Retrieve my wand.”

Ba’al didn’t question her, he couldn’t. He just reached out for the witch, and Sin knocked aside his hand. She didn’t try and use any magic, or hesitate. She was just dismissive of the attack like it wasn’t one of the demirulers of the Underworld.

The creature shook his hand as if it hurt, and looked at her in confusion. Sin glared passed him at Dan, “Don’t be a witch about this.”

“I am a witch!” Dan snapped, “I have treated you like dirt unworthy to stick to my shoe for years! Why do you presume to command me? To take what is mine? To know my mind better than I myself know it? I will strike you down!”

Sin yawned, “Are you done with the tantrum yet? Oh, and Ba’al, for touching me... You are exiled to the Pit for ten years.”

The demon vanished, screaming.

Dan swallowed nervously, looking at her friend, “Did... Did you just exile my demon, one of the demirulers, to the Pit beneath the Underworld? How? That’s not possible. You’re just a witch. You don’t get to make rules.”

Sin shrugged, ignoring the question completely, “Are you going to be reasonable? Or are you going to continue to pretend like you hate me? I’ve got some patience for abuse, thanks to your godmothers, but I still have feelings.”

Dan clenched her fists, summoning up her courage, “Eauq aem edder!”

Raw magic, without a tool like a wand to channel it, was dangerous, difficult, and stupid. It wasn’t that it was weaker than using a channel, it was so strong that it began to create its own magical effects and side-effects.

Sin swatted aside the spell.

Dan’s jaw dropped, and she fell to her knees, “What in the utter fuck?”

The room flashed bright red, and Dan winced as she felt her mouth fill with soapy water. She spat it out, scraping at her tongue. She had learned a very long time ago that her godmothers disapproved of swearing.

Sin raised an eyebrow, “That was weird. Oh well. Dan... You have to realise it by now. You’re depressed. So I’m not leaving you alone. Not until I can make it slightly better. I can’t fix it. I can help. That’s all.”

She hadn't realised it.

She had read about depression, of course. Something for weaker wills than her own. Less powerful minds. Less skilled witches. Lesser people. It wasn't possible that she, the greatest animancer to have lived, could be suffering from such a weak thing.

Sin smiled at her knowingly, "Depression can hit anyone, Dan. Witches can't cure it. We can make people fall in love. That should tell you something. It isn't something to be ashamed of. It's a chemical thing. Your brain screwing with you. There are things that can help."

Dan shook her head, "I've screamed at you. I've summoned demons, and even tried to cast raw magic. I know you're slow, but are you really this slow?"

Sin dropped into the room and walked over to her, sitting down beside her and putting both arms around her in a hug, "Yup!"

Dan felt tears running down her cheeks, as she tried to pretend that this meant nothing at all to her. She just wanted to be left alone. She didn't want Sin here. She didn't want her cat. She didn't want Sin to show her any kind of affection.

Sin rested her head on Dan's shoulder and smiled, "Still trying to lie to yourself?"

Dan shook her head, too upset to speak.

"Do you want a cupcake?"

Dan nodded stiffly, trying to pretend not to notice that it sent tears flying from her face.

Sin waved her wand, "Creepius summonae!"

A picnic blanket, a woven basket, and a tea set, appeared. Sin waved her wand, spawning a tiny whirl of wind and the basket was dragged over and opened. She glared down at it, "I brought ten cupcakes. Not eight."

Dan smiled weakly as she realised that a demon in the Underworld must have taken two of them as the objects passed through. Impressive, but perhaps suicidal, considering Sin's rather creepy ability to do whatever she felt like.

Sin picked up a cupcake, still hugging her and held it up to her mouth. Dan took a bite, smiling despite herself.

She still hated herself for eating more crap, but it coming from a friend made her feel slightly less like she was diaphora out of a troll's behind.

Sin held her, "I'm always going to be here for you. This isn't going away overnight. You have me and Chloe and Kim. Always. Even when you don't want us."

Dan sighed heavily and relaxed into the hug, "I'll turn you into an ant and crush you under my boot if you leave. That's what you've signed up for."

Sin giggled at her.

Episode Twenty One: Sin vs Boredom

She tapped a finger to her chin as the blood rushed to her head. It was starting to get painful, if she was honest, but it wasn't solving her problem. She'd hoped that hanging upside down from her favourite tree in the Dead Forest would give her an idea.

It was just giving her a headache.

She dropped onto the ground inelegantly, and leaned back against the tree. Snowball leapt into her lap and curled into a ball. Sin knew better than to try and pet him. This was a trap.

She was bored.

She did have some study she could be doing, but she didn't have to. One day a week where she could do whatever she wanted. That was what her godmothers granted her, and usually she would go absolutely wild with it, having planned for it the whole week.

But with the Tourney, and then Dan's depression, she was out of ideas. That and she was banned from leaving the Dead Forest, and the godmothers had actually erected a barrier that she couldn't breach.

She could bounce into the Underworld, but then she got torn back, and emptied her stomach, bladder and bowels simultaneously. The godmothers knew how to make it mean.

She sighed, and looked up at the sky, "Why is home so boring, Snowball? it should be fun. I have magic. I can make new magic. I could summon any demon and have a tea party but... I just... Can't be bothered. Too much like work."

The cat meowed and stretched tiredly.

"There are no plays in the Dead Forest." Sin answered her cat, "I know you like them, and I do as well. But we're not exactly going to catch 'The Demon Wizard of Drek' in the middle of absolute butthole. Nobody else lives here."

Snowball meowed sarcastically, an ability that all cats possess.

Sin frowned, "I guess... I could summon some things to act it out for us... But they've never acted before. And there will be no props. It won't be any good."

Snowball curled into a ball. He didn't particularly care, he was more than happy to sleep in her lap. Which would trap her for the whole day, in utter boredom, unless she wanted her arm lacerated.

"Fine." Sin replied, "Get up. Time to summon a cast of the dead."

The cat glared at her, and lazily rolled off her and landed on its back in the dirt. Sin stood up, thinking. It was the first play that the creatures would be attempting, probably. The only other necromancers were her godmothers, and she couldn't think of them doing something like this. Or doing anything for fun, to be honest.

She needed something simple, and something that would be fun to watch even if they did badly. As much as she adored the tragedy of 'the Demon Wizard of Drek', there was no way they could pull off the subtleties necessary. The serial killer wrapped inside a hero was not something that could be done by a rotting corpse that didn't even remember if it was human.

The simplest story was probably a comedy. The guy gets his girl, and defeats the evil. Something like that. Most of those were boring. A few were cute and funny enough that you could make it through. One of those would work.

"Morguin of Avalon." Sin stated, almost as a command. Daring anyone within hearing distance to question the wisdom of her choice, the beauty of the play, and the excitement that this undertaking would

have.

Snowball yowled sarcastically.

“Oblivia darkus!” Sin banished the doubter. She tapped her foot for a minute, counting down the seconds. She walked over to a tree, inspecting it and pruning one of the smaller dead branches.

She shrugged, “Creepius summonae.”

The angry white furball flung itself away from the questing dead hands as they screamed their way out of the Underworld. He meowled at her angrily, scuffed her boot once and turned around, walking back towards the house.

Sin’s eyes watered, “But... If you leave... Who will watch my play?”

Snowball huffed.

“No. Not my godmothers.” Sin glared, “They’re the ones that grounded me. Well, I did break a lot of rules... But they grounded me. I can’t even invite my friends!”

The cat’s response was clear.

It was not his problem.

Sin fell to her knees crying loudly. She had almost escaped her prison of boredom. Now she was trapped here, with nothing to do. Snowball was holding a grudge against her for a teeny-tiny banishment to a dark oblivion. It wasn’t her fault that he was such an annoying spirit trapped in a cat’s body!

There was only one thing for it.

She wiped her tears, and prepared herself. She wouldn’t be putting on the play today. She would be preparing it. She would bind the souls, and teach them. Until she could summon her friends to witness the glory that was her direction!

First though, she needed to know what she was dealing with. Just how much rewriting would she need to do? The action scenes would be a problem for the ones that fell apart, but when you offer a longterm contract, you never knew what kind you would get.

“Seven suns rise, seven suns fall, seven rise to my call!” She began the rite, violet eyes flashing beneath her hat, “I offer power! I offer glory! I offer the stage to earn thy honour!”

She placed her feet apart carefully, holding out her hands as if she were offering something up. “Of romance, of betrayal, I offer the court of Artur!”

“Rise, again! Actors old, actors new, actors long expired!” Sin shouted, “Come forth from the shadows, beyond the curtain, to face the crowd!”

She was beginning to feel silly at this point. With most rites, the ground would have shaken by now, or at least an unearthly howl or something. Had she remembered it properly? Maybe there was a missing ingredient. Or maybe no one wanted to play with her. She had been summoning and binding a lot.

Maybe they wanted her to show them some more respect. Some space from being summoned, and more presents. That would make sense. They were her friends, not her toys.

“Let the shadow of Morguin stretch, let her love, her tragedy, be seen upon the stage. Let the glory of Artur shine, as he fought for what was just, and what was kind. Clothe yourself in mortal flesh, and appear before me, now.”

She sighed, sitting down and blowing out her cheeks. No one had turned up. She had definitely got something wrong. She was used to disaster, and failure. It didn’t change the fact that she would be

extremely bored.

The ground in front of her lifted like a trapdoor, revealing the sparkling blue eyes of something dead, “Eh... Only seven? That’s all you’ll be wanting?”

Sin blinked, surprised, “I... Guess? I’m still working out how a play run by dead people will work.”

The eyes twinkled excitedly, “We could have rehearsals! That’ll cut out the arguments down here.”

Sin cocked her head, “Arguments?”

“Well, you’re Sin. Everybody down here wants to help you out. You give us food and drink even when we no longer have the organs for it.” The hidden face rasped, “Everybody likes you, witch.”

Sin leaned back, “How many people have lined up their interest...?”

A question she had been forced to learn after her last portentia potentia had just about emptied the entire Underworld. She did learn from her mistakes, even if she still made them.

“About twenty... Twenty five.”

“That’s not bad.”

“Thousand.” The demonic entity continued, “Sorry. Talking without. A tongue can be. Difficult.”

Sin leaned forward quickly, “Thousand!? No way! A hundred or less. You might be immortal, but I’m not!”

The entity seemed confused for a moment, and then the shadows nodded and the earth dropped shut.

She blew her hair. The dead had no idea what was reasonable. Did all necromancers have to deal with this kind of ludicrousness?

Episode Twenty Two: Kim vs Solomon

A day off. This was the day of the week that Kim struggled with the most. Her godmothers would ban her from using tekmagic. They never listened when she tried to tell them that programming golems was fun for her. She wasn't allowed to mess with any of that.

She also couldn't stay at home reading tekmanuals and magazines about all the latest inventions and crazes. She was kicked out the door and told to go explore and experience the city, and to not be back before sundown. Then, they locked the door.

It sucked, so hard.

Usually, she would just go hang out with Sin. That little witch was always up to something fun and exciting, and often downright dangerous. However, Sin was grounded. A barrier was up around her home, and even the messaging emblem that Kim had made for her had been confiscated.

Chloe didn't get days off. She wasn't just a witch, she was also the queen. The world didn't stop just because you wished that it would. She would be in the market, doing her meet and greet, listening to the people too scared to approach her or the palace.

Dan was probably free to do something, but Kim didn't have anything to invite her to do, and she couldn't exactly invite herself into whatever the witch had decided to fill her day with. Inviting her just to hang out just seemed to make Dan's mood worse, and that wasn't something she'd let herself be responsible for.

She wandered down the familiar line of shops, and paused outside a stall, pulling out a round coin with a slot in the center, and handed it over to the stallkeeper. She picked up the stick and bit into her toffee apple and kept walking.

Too much sugar was crazy bad for you, but she had a sweet tooth, and it was her day off. She'd have to make up for it later. She paused, nearly missing her step as she saw the boy at the tek shop up ahead.

She was heading that way, but now she didn't know if she could. He was cuter than anything she had ever seen. He was about her height, with blonde hair hanging halfway down his face, and grease stains on his hands.

She swallowed, crushed down the fear in her chest into a tiny ball and walked over to the stall slowly. The shopkeep grinned as he saw her, "Miss Kimiko! Some turnout at the Tourney, eh? Fancy trying to control a nanoswarm on her first try?"

Kim nodded politely, "Penny did only have my scraps. It was overly ambitious, but she did have a breakthrough. The 'vore was self-powered."

The shopkeep looked at her in surprise, "That's huge! Why hasn't she written a paper on it yet? She could corner a huge part of the market with something like that."

"Godmothers." Kim mused, and she looked down at the table, and picked up a magazine, "What's the latest?"

"Don't you have eyes?" The boy beside her asked in irritation, plainly not liking the friendly treatment she was getting.

"Sorry. This is Solomon, a distant cousin." The shopkeep said quickly, "Sol, show some respect. Everything on my table runs on her code."

Solomon looked at with distaste, "Doesn't mean her code is worth it. Bug filled junk. Barely works half the time."

She could deal with being insulted. What she couldn't deal with was someone insulting her work. She maintained it, faster and better than anyone in the industry that she knew of.

"You been smoking from the animancers' garden?" Kim glared at him.

He rolled his eyes, "I'm not cracked. But you are if you think invalid memory isn't in your golem core. And what happens when you touch magic outside the timeline? Poof. Anything."

Kim glared at him, "Asshole. Ignorant asshole. The core has had bounds checking for two years. Fuzzing, static analysis, too. If you're builder is too lazy to upgrade, it ain't my fault."

He rolled his eyes, "So? You can't even prove it works like you say it does."

She stepped forward onto his foot, crushing it as she leaned her forehead into his angrily, "Actually, I can. I released my proof-verified compiler the day before the Tourney you insolent little whelp."

He surprised her, kissing her briefly.

She stared in wonder and shock as he spun around, walking away slowly as he waved. "It's been radical, Kimiko!"

"Sorry. He likes to argue." The shopkeep started to explain, but it was just static in the background for her.

He'd kissed her.

She'd never kissed anyone before. He'd been soft, gentle. It made her want more, even though he'd stolen it. Taken it because he knew it would take time and effort to earn it.

The magazine crumpled in her fist, and she whistled with her other hand. The shops all froze, and Solomon turned back, looking at her in mild confusion. Kim sneered, "Boy. Walk back over here."

He laughed and turned to continue on his merry way, as the shopkeep started to babble excuses for his behaviour. She wasn't interested. She did not have to take this kind of disrespect in her own city.

"Vore. Panzer vor." Kim growled angrily.

Alarms began blaring, as gates erupted around the street, sealing off passageways and other streets. Atop the gates automatic targetting crossbows pulled into view, and armed themselves.

A mechanical, crackling, version of her own voice spoke slowly and calmly, "Remain where you are. This area is under lockdown. Remain where you are. Any attempt to leave will be taken as hostile action and you will be fired upon."

The message continued, and she strode over to the boy, who was watching how most of the armaments in the area seemed to be pointed at him, personally. Kim put a hand on her hip, glaring, "You're an asshole. And that was assault."

He swallowed nervously, "Okay."

She grinned, "Aw, too scared to disagree? I guess that means I'll just charge you, and you can spend the night in the cells."

"There's... An alternative?" He sweated.

She rolled her eyes, "You could start with an apology."

"I'm sorry I was rude."

She slapped him, hard. "Not for that! Geeze, you'd think I don't deal with assholes all the time. I'm the chief tekmaner in the city. Do you know how many idiots barge into my workshop demanding I fix broken crap?"

He looked up at her, "You're... Pissed about..."

"You kissed me!" She snapped, about ready to give the order to fire. "I am not some object you can own! Geeze. You'd think I was talking to a fricking golem."

"Sorry." He said quietly, "You were just so cute and..."

"Not a comic book." Kim growled, "You don't just walk up to a girl and kiss her. Who raised you, trolls?"

He looked at her in utter fear, "I really am sorry."

She nodded, "That's a start. But, I'm not letting it go. Go back and help your cousin, or whatever, for the rest of the day. I'm assigning a golem to watch you. You will behave, and you will be helpful."

Solomon nodded.

She snapped her fingers, "Vore. Panzer ruuck."

The armaments and walls began to fold away, and her recording spoke, "Thank you for your cooperation. The situation has now been resolved."

Solomon shook his head, "So... You have like city-wide control?"

Kim gave him a death stare.

He rubbed the back of his head, "I'm sorry. Really. You're just incredibly cute."

She turned around, looking at her crumpled magazine. She needed to go pay for it. "Come along, suicidal idiot."

Episode Twenty Three: Chloe vs Vampire

She dragged her blanket over her head, moaning. It was way too early for whatever the heck was making all the racket. She absolutely refused to have anything to do with whatever this morning's crisis was.

The chaos entered her room.

She could hear the guards shouting and searching for whatever it was. She glared at her blanket, but nobody was coming. They obviously were too panicked to even protect their queen.

She tossed the blanket back, slamming her hands together, "Adileg ongats!"

The raw spell whipped out of her hands, slamming into the man poised over her bed, claw and fangs barred.

She leapt to the side in terror, scrabbling for her wand.

She knew why the guards were in such disarray, now. Most of them would be dead. This was a vampire. An ancient and infectious evil.

She found her wand, "Emeragus Sin!"

The ice cracked, and the figure stood up slowly, "Sorry, did I startle you?"

She pointed her wand, "Don't move!"

"I am a gentleman, I assure you." The vampire said, adjusting his cufflinks, "I merely sought a witch to explain the situation. The curse of my existence is difficult. I'm afraid I was caught in the stables. My hunger bested me, but I have not fed upon a human in some time."

She knew she shouldn't be listening. The voice of a vampire was charming, disarming. It forced you to believe that they were beautiful, elegant. It hid the monster beneath. The curse of the magical disease stripped away all but a hint of humanity. It left only what was useful for seduction and destruction. Pushing the victim to spread the disease.

The ground shook, but it wasn't Sin who emerged from the howling Underworld. It was one of her godmothers. The tall one. "Back, nightmare!"

The man's regal face became a twisted wreck of fangs and pulsating flesh, "Necromancer."

"I am Sister Hera." The woman spoke, her hands empty of any magical tool, "And by Asmodeus, by Leviathon and by Belphegor, I banish you!"

The vampire only had a moment to look surprised before he vanished in a puff of ash.

Hera staggered and then fell to her knees. Chloe raced towards her, but the witch tossed up her hand, a barrier knocking her back, "Stop!"

She stared in surprise, confused.

More screams filled her room as the two other godmothers, and Sin, emerged. They looked prepared for a fight. Except for Sin, who was holding out a bright pink and glowing vial to her fallen godmother.

Chloe curtsied, "Thank you for saving me."

"I didn't." Hera said, and then gulped the potion, shivering at the hideous taste. "You sweetened it, wench."

Sin smiled nervously, "It's more effective. Sugar helps it absorb into the -"

"Shut up!" Hera screeched, "Don't say that word!"

Sin looked over at her slowly, and her eyes became purple discs of concern, tears welling up inside them, “Oh, Chloe.”

She swallowed, “What do you mean you didn’t save me?”

Hera stood upright slowly and frowned, “Fetch Diana, Sin. This will need her attention as much as mine.”

Chloe stamped her foot, “I am queen! This is my bedroom, and my life! You will tell me what is going on!”

Sin bit her lip, but disappeared back through the Underworld, off to see the head godmother of the Animancy Coven. She knew that Sin was intimidated by her godmothers, but usually the girl would fight them, and try and tell her what was going on.

Hera looked at her, and her expression softened from shrew to gorgon. “I know that we are pushing the bounds of propriety, your majesty. However, I can not fully explain the situation to you without causing greater risk to yourself, and the city.”

Chloe winced, turning her head and sighed, “Oh crapballs. He bit me, didn’t he?”

“You know that any answer, whether positive or negative, may put you at risk.” Hera sighed, “Come now, my queen, you are a witch. Explain the situation to me. What should we be doing?”

Chloe sat down on the edge of her bed, “Isolate the potential victim. Check the surrounding grounds for others. It is rare only one is attacked. And well... I woke up to the fight.”

One of the other godmothers curtsied, “I will go see to the palace.”

Hera nodded, “Thank you, Lydia.”

Chloe looked at the remaining two, and frowned, “What about my own godmothers? Shouldn’t they be here?”

Hera didn’t glare at her. She didn’t protest or make up excuses. Her stare was flat, and absent of any emotion at all. Chloe grabbed the edge of her bed in her fists, “My godmothers.”

She had lost her parents when she was young. She couldn’t remember them, really. A scent, a laugh. A washed out image, that might be a face. She hurt every single time she thought about that loss. Her godmothers were all she had. The only family she had left was the magical one. The magic passed down her bloodline.

She could not lose them, as well.

“They’ve been isolated.” Prune yawned, “Do you think Lydia has cleared the kitchens yet? I could have me some pie.”

“Propriety.” Hera instructed her sister, “Sin would not forgive you if you allowed anything to happen to the queen. Whilst you may no longer find my wrath motivating, our goddaughter has a temper superior to my own.”

Prune rubbed the back of her head, flaking dandruff everywhere, “You got a point. It’s also at the end of your nose.”

Chloe frowned, “Does necromancy just force the faerytale? Is Sin going to become the tall one if she becomes a godmother?”

“Sin will not become a godmother.” Hera replied, and nodded slowly, “However, yes. The three of us seem like something from a faerytale. There is a good reason for this, your majesty. One that I would let you know, on the condition that you do not inform Sin.”

Chloe winced, "I don't keep secrets from my friends."

"It is not a secret, merely a confirmation." Hera replied stoically, "The villagers speak of us, often. Some of them suggest we are undead lich, risen from the grave to continue the necromantic line."

Chloe sighed, "And... You're going to tell me anyway."

"It is important that the queen of Wizeria know of the threat to Wizeria." Hera continued, "The villagers are partially correct. However, only partially. We three are not undead, we live. We also did not return to the world to continue the necromantic line."

Chloe looked at them curiously, "What threat?"

"We were resurrected for one purpose, and one alone." Hera stated as if resurrection of a living person was something that was even possible, "To prepare Sin for the coming battle. She has returned. The Witch of the Failing Light."

Chloe's hands stopped trying to burrow themselves through her blanket, and her feet stopped moving nervously. She felt a very real chill of fear run down her back, but she didn't shiver. She was too scared to allow the involuntary movement to happen.

"That's a myth."

Hera smiled cruelly at her, "You're queen. You know it is not."

Chloe looked down, "So. It's Sin, then."

"Yes."

Chloe looked up at the both of them, "And you haven't told her what she will have to face. The choice she will have to make, and the fight that she has inherited."

"Not yet." Hera replied, "We will, in time. You may protect the city. Sin deserves what little time she has. She will learn, as she must. We will guide her in it. Yet, she may also participate in potion tournaments, and invent fun magic, and even strive to bring a flower back to life. Let her have what fun she can."

That was when Chloe realised how deeply Sin's godmothers cared for her. They were trying to give her the only mercy that they could. Time to be just a witch, in a world that had cursed her from before she was even conceived.

"I will keep your counsel." Chloe said slowly.

There was a flash of light, and Diana appeared, holding Sin by the back of her shirt. The animancer tossed aside the hedgewitch without concern. She strode over to the queen and lifted her chin, "Drink."

A green, and frothing, liquid was poured down her throat. Chloe's eyes watered and she punched the bed, coughing violently. The animancer nodded slowly, "Good. This is good. We appear to have come to you in time, then."

Hera rolled her eyes, "No, you didn't, Diana. The curse has already taken root in her soul."

"I leave that to you." Diana snapped, "For now, it appears that I can suppress the symptoms. We will begin with one of these tonics, once a day."

Chloe touched the side of her neck gently, feeling the tiny pinprick bumps where something had pierced her neck. It must have been whilst she thought he was talking to her. That hadn't happened. He had been inside her head, and been feeding on her.

She had contracted vampirism.

Hera sighed, "No one has ever broken the curse, Diana. You will have to monitor the queen's condition, and slowly increase your efforts, whilst I delve into very old, and very dark, magics."

Diana looked over at her, "You seem perfectly suited to the task then, corpsehumper."

The animancer reeled in shock as Sin slapped her. The tiny hedgewitch glared at the woman who had once been her godmother, "Insult them again. Please. Give me an excuse, animancer!"

Chloe waved a hand, "I need her Sin."

"You need her mind. Not her soul." The witch snapped at her, and glared, "You will never insult my godmothers again. I won't allow it."

Diana touched her cheek in shock, feeling the warmth of her swelling face, "You dare to strike me, apprentice?"

"Sin." Hera said gravely, and the hedgewitch looked back at her, voice cracking, "I won't let her."

Hera smiled, "I can defend myself, child. And I do intend to if the lifer does not begin to understand that we have no interest in the living. A vampire queen is not something that I would have a problem with."

Diana glared at her in disgust, "I will not take insults from your kind."

"But you'll take nightmares." Hera laughed, her voice hollow, "Every night, until the moon next wanes. For daring to treat my goddaughter with such disrespect. You can insult me all you like Diana, I am too old to care. But Sin is not one of your apprentices. She is a necromancer."

Chloe heard it, and looked up, "Is Sin an apprentice?"

Sin looked over at her, "Oh. I never have explained that have I? I am, but I'm not. Not really."

Hera rolled her eyes, "We will work on your diction. That was pathetic. Necromancers do not have apprentices. We do have hierarchy. Sin is free, unless she is under punishment, to do as she wishes. She was granted what Wizeria considers to be full witchdom when we first took her in. Took her away from this hag with an ugly soul."

Diana held up a hand, and Hera grinned, "Would you rather hear that your soul is a vile shade from your mother or grandmother?"

The animancer hesitated, apparently as afraid of her ancestors as Dan was afraid of her.

Diana nodded slowly, "We will cooperate, in this matter only, hag."

Hera grinned at her, "You focus on keeping the queen's health stable. I will seek out the first of the vampires. It will take time."

Chloe felt a hand grab hers, and looked up at Sin's worried face and smiled, "Thank you. For bringing them."

Sin breathed out a ragged breath, "I won't let anyone hurt you, Chloe."

Diana scoffed, and disappeared in a glow of light.

Episode Twenty Four: Dan vs Flour

The animancer raised her hands above the pages of the ancient and stained tome, muttering quietly to herself, words of wisdom passed down through the ages, hidden in the shrouds of family legacies. She intoned the words, attempting to memorise them.

“In a large metal bowl, mix butter, oil and sugar until light and fluffy.”

The witch frowned, attempting to perfectly measure out the three ingredients into the nearby bowl. She picked up the whisk, and looked at it in confusion, attempting to work out how something designed to pass through things could be used to mix effectively. She knew that cooking was supposed to be like alchemy, but it was a lot less precise than she wanted it.

The result had to be perfect. She would accept nothing less.

Her elbow groaned in pain as she held the metal bowl in one hand, and spun the whisk through the material quickly, and effectively. Churning through the solid material and creating something more like the goop that might be found in a forest haunted by all kinds of creatures.

She placed the bowl aside, and looked down at the estoric verse in front of her, “Add buttermilk, eggs, and extract of vanilla.”

She looked at the nearby mortar and pestle, and the liquid in it. She had tried to make vanilla extract. It was too hard to get a hold off. The pods themselves were worth a gold piece each. The brown liquid beckoned to her, threatening to make or break her attempts.

She waved her wand, commanding the liquid to enter the bowl. She cracked the eggs and twitched as a tiny piece of shell fell inwards. Again, the wand came out, and she lifted it into the air before eviscerating it in flames.

Finally, she looked at the tin of buttermilk. The dairy farmer had been quite confused why she wanted the liquid left after churning the milk. He had heard of it being used to make a simple bread, but not much else. She, however, knew that buttermilk had been a secret ingredient in her family for generations. That it was an ingredient that could make the impossible, possible.

She poured it in, measuring it carefully.

“Beat until combined.” She mouthed over the words, considering their meaning. It probably did not mean for her to punch the mixture in the bowl until it was a soggy mess. It was possible, some bread was made that way, but cooking terms were often deceptively misleading.

She resorted to the whisk. It was harder this time, much harder. The mixture flowed into itself, slowly becoming less liquid, but still an absolute mess that did not remotely resemble something that might be edible. The most important ingredients came last, transforming something simple, into something delectable.

“Add flour, baking powder, and salt. Mix until combined.” Dan sighed, reading one of the last steps.

She measured the ingredients out in the various shaped cups. These were the key to good cooking. Accurate amounts, measured in units that only her ancestors understood. She hadn’t found the cups, only descriptions of them. However, those drawings and writings had been accurate enough that Kim had been able to create the metal objects in her hands.

Cooking like this was a lost artform. Most bakers were low level witches. They could simply command their ingredients to clump together and transform into the object that they were trying to form. The results were hit or miss, depending on the skill of the witch.

However, Dan was not about to cheat. She was avoiding the use of magic. Unless she was pissed off. This was about giving her hands something to do, her mind something to focus on. For her, magic was too easy. Cooking was an outlet for the hideous ball of emotions locked inside her skull.

She wiped a tear away with her elbow, and steadied her breathing.

She was fine.

She was doing just fine.

She poured the mixture into the waiting tiny tins, filling each halfway towards the rim, knowing that it should rise and the top should expand almost like a mushroom. These were one of her families most prized and protected secrets, from generations past.

The cupcake.

She placed the tins into the oven carefully, avoiding the heat of the furnace, as the salamander lying on the coals at the bottom rolled over. That was the secret of a good oven. Even cooking.

There were not many households in Wizeria that could boast that they had even seen a fire salamander. Her family had a half dozen that they had trained to provide heat for the various appliances throughout the building. Not just ovens. Dan could enjoy a hot shower every morning, without expending any of her magic, or needing to light a boiler. The salamanders always kept it hot. No need to burn any wood.

Well, a log or two a day. For the creatures to break down into a bed of coals that they could laze around on. And eat.

She closed the oven door and leaned back, becoming aware of just how dirty she had become. Flour and sugar got everywhere, it seemed.

Dan headed up to her bedroom, discarding her dress as she entered the room, and she turned to her wardrobe and opened it, fingers dancing across the top of the various items, considering their appeal. Many of them were only for formal occasions. She wanted something comfortable, not beautiful.

She pulled out a white dress with red lining and turned around, and let out a squeal, collapsing onto her knees and holding the dress up over herself. Lying on her bed, was a witch that had woken up to the ear-piercing sound.

Sin sat up, rubbing her eyes, "What? What's wrong?"

"You broke in again!" Dan snapped, creating a wall around herself, and began getting dressed, "Privicia! How did you do it this time? I thought I'd blocked everything off!"

"I stepped sideways." Sin yawned, "That was you? I thought it was your godmothers. Who I'm in trouble with."

Dan sighed, "My godmothers? What did you do?"

"Got angry." Sin said slowly, "They didn't tell you."

Dan dropped the walls with a wave of her hand, and tucked it into her pocket, "Tell me what?"

Sin bit her lip, "Chloe is sick."

Dan felt her heart skip a beat, "My godmothers were called? Chloe avoids them. She has to be really sick if she's asking for their help."

"My godmother asked for yours to help." Sin winced, "I... I... I came here for you to cheer me up. Not to tell you this. I don't know how."

Dan crossed over, sitting next to Sin on the bed and cuddled her, resting her chin on her head, "It's okay, Sin. I'll find out one way or another."

"She was bitten." Sin managed before the tears started flooding down her face. Dan held her more tightly, wondering. There were a number of illnesses that could be passed by bite. Most of them, really. However, there weren't a lot of things that could get close enough to the queen to bite her.

"Twelve guards are dead." Sin shivered, "Chloe's godmothers look like they escaped. Your mum is keeping them under quarantine until she's sure."

Dan felt a terrified tear appear on her own face, "Oh, no. No..."

"Vampire." Sin said, choking out the word.

Dan had worked it out. It was the only reason that Sin and her godmothers could be helpful. There were more than a few cursed diseases, which might need an expert animancer to deal with. There was only one or two that needed a necromancer and an animancer.

Dan closed her eyes, "Chloe was bitten."

"Your mum thinks she'll be okay." Sin shrugged, "But I just... Feel... Hopeless..."

Dan smiled at her, "I.. Was making something for you, today. To thank you for helping out at the tourney. Do you want to take them to Chloe?"

"She's not allowed to eat."

Dan winced and shook her head, "This is going to suck."

"Poor choice of words." Sin stated hollowly, like she was barely listening. Which she probably wasn't. The orphan had never had many friends. She was the disaster who everyone loved to hate. The prospect of losing Chloe would be shaking her to her core.

Dan patted her back gently, "We can get through this, Sin."

The witch looked up at her, "Yes. We can. Both of us."

Dan laughed softly, "Just because I feel like crap doesn't mean I've been giving up. I made you cupcakes. Well, they're in the oven."

Sin blinked, "Ooh. You've been learning to cook. That's cute."

Dan looked away, "Like I said. To thank you. I needed something to do."

"We need a present for Chloe." Sin said stubbornly, "I was thinking... It'll be embarrassing... But... Mana."

Dan shivered, "You want to go to one of those game stalls? Really?"

"Not want." Sin laughed, "But Chloe likes the card game. So we have to learn to play at some point."

Dan blew her fringe in irritation, "The things we do for friendship."

Sin leaned up and kissed her cheek, "For Chloe. Anything."

Before Dan could react, the hedgewitch had dragged her to her feet and was summoning them off to the marketplace.

What the heck had just happened?

Episode Twenty Five: Sin vs Caerlorne

“Immortalis maintenant!” Sin cursed her cupcake to never degrade, and put it on the shelf with other presents she’d got from the other witches. It had taken a while to learn the spell, but she had been motivated. Particularly as she used the spell on one of her godmothers.

Sin smiled as she remembered the anger of the animancy coven when they discovered the godmother frozen in time. That had been fun, to be able to get them back for some of the horrible things that they had done to her over the years. The way they had treated her as a failure.

She knew she wasn’t a particularly good or powerful witch, but she was still a witch. She deserved some respect for her talents. Moving covens hadn’t really done anything for her reputation among most of the others.

The door cracked open, and Lydia peeked in, “Sin, dear?”

She looked over, dropping the cloth over her present shelf so nobody could see it, “Ye... Yes!?”

Lydia smiled knowingly, “You have a friend downstairs.”

Sin’s face balled up, “Excuse me? The others avoid the Dead Forest. Too hard to get to without Dan’s pterodactyl.”

Lydia shrugged, opening the door, “She’s cute, if that helps. I’m going to go back and save her before Prune decides to put her inside a cottage pie. Come down soon.”

Sin scratched her head and shrugged. She picked her hat off the floor, dislodging Snowball from where he had been sleeping, and put it on her head. You can’t be a witch without a decent pointed hat. That was one thing that all the covens agreed upon.

Sin looked around, frowning, and then tucked a couple potions into her various pockets. Nothing that strange or important. Things to dazzle an enemy, and allow you to run and escape before they realised exactly what you had done.

She skipped down the stairs, and into the lounge room, and looked over. Prune was there, pinching the newcomer here and there, and muttering about measurements to herself. Her godmother hadn’t eaten a guest yet, but Sin was not entirely sure that she wouldn’t try to one day.

She sat down on a stool, “Hello, Morgana.”

Her godmothers drew back instantly in fear, and the black-clothed witch inclined her head politely, “Sin. It is good to see you. I was sorry to hear about Chloe.”

“She’s doing okay.” Sin said, fighting the feeling in her chest, “So what brings you here? It isn’t exactly the easiest place to find.”

“It isn’t that hard.” Morgana smiled, “I lived in the Dead Forest, once, a very long time ago. A little cottage, a little ways from here. I hid it as well as I could, but I was young then.”

Sin blinked, “You lived here? I didn’t think anybody else did.”

“It was a long time ago.” Morgana repeated, “When your godmothers were asleep. However, now, I live in Caerlorne. It’s a nice enough city, most of the time, but there are problems now and then. I was actually hoping to get your help with one of them.”

Sin frowned, “I don’t think I should leave Wizeria right now. I want to stay close.”

Lydia smiled at her, “No, Sin. It would be good for you to get away. Hera won’t be back from the Ethereal Plane for another week. It does no good for you to sit here, stressed.”

Morgana spread her hands, "I'll tell you the problem, first. Then you can decide. I'm usually quite adept at keeping the city safe, on my own. Gwain takes care of the politics, and I deal with the monsters."

Sin nodded, she had heard of the Prince Gwain. Supposedly, he had fought a number of monsters in his youth. An adventuring king. It happened, now and then. It wasn't terribly common, but kings like that tended to have a witch or two helping them out as friends.

"Recently, bodies began disappearing from a cemetery just outside town." Morgana said, leaning onto her knees. "I was stumped. The bodies vanished without the graves being dug up. It took us a while to realise it was happening, why my magical detectors were complaining."

Sin bit her lip, "A lich."

Morgana blinked in surprise, "Yes. Or I'm guessing it is. Any attempt to detect or bind or protect the cemetery ends in disaster. We can't just move the bodies. There are ancestor spirits linked to the bones. It would take months of rites to prepare them for moving."

Sin sighed, "I've met a lich before. He was mean. Very mean. They're difficult to deal with. Their magic doesn't come directly from the leylines. More like a mix from the leyline and the Ethereal Plane. They have no connection to the Underworld, though a number have been banished there."

Morgana nodded, "Yes. I have tracked down the name of this particular lich, which I thought would be half the battle. I was wrong. I fought him, and he trounced me."

Sin blinked, "You can't name him and bind him?"

"No." Morgana said, her brows furrowing, "Which is why I thought it might help to have a necromancer around. I think all I've managed to do is annoy him, and I'm all but sure the bodies being stolen will be turned into ghouls or zombies for use as weapons against the city."

"Dead sorcerers are difficult." Sin agreed, "You said you knew his name. Who was he? Before he died and discovered magic?"

"A tyrant." Morgana replied, "He was buried in a tomb, and the location expunged from our records, to try and forget him. There's a few vague references suggesting that he might not have been dead when they sealed him away, but there is a public record of his execution, so I'm not sure. His name was Urt. I think. Like I said, the name didn't bind him."

Sin frowned and pulled a tiny runestone from her pocket and flipped it once. As it was in the air it turned into a extremely large and heavy book. She opened it to the index at the back and ran her finger down the page. The hedge witch flipped the book open to another page and looked down the list of names.

"Ure, Ut... Urt. Looking for something near Caer... Urtr of Caer." She turned the book around, revealing a portrait of a king, one foot standing on a crushed skull, and a spear in his right hand, a flag tied to the end of it and waving in the wind.

Morgana nodded slowly, "It might be. The family crest is similar."

Sin turned it back around, "Killed a few hundred people... Blah blah... Kidnapped a princess... Ah. He was the last of his dynasty. Might explain why his spirit wouldn't settle. Weird. It doesn't say who killed him, or how. Doesn't even see what dynasty replaced his."

"Caerlorne wasn't united." Morgana shrugged, "A ragged group of warlords, rising and falling often. Until the time of Artur. He was the one who founded the city."

Sin looked up, "Or so the legend says?"

"No, Sin." Morgana replied, "Artur founded Caerlorne. The rest of the world might have forgotten

him, and assumed he was just a legend, but we haven't. His portrait is on display in the palace."

Sin shrugged, "This is the Book of the Dead, Morgana. Artur isn't in it. I know. I've looked for him, before. So unless he was immortal and faked his death..."

"It's more complicated." Morgana said slowly, and shrugged, "Not something that I'm particularly comfortable talking about."

Sin nodded, "Fair enough."

She didn't believe Morgana. The Book of the Dead recorded the deaths of every living thing. Whether or not it was sentient, or had died before. It also recorded the deeds of the dead. If Artur wasn't in the book, then Artur had never been alive.

Or that's what she tried to tell herself every time she had a nightmare.

Sin read for a moment and looked up, "So, this Urtr. He was mean and nasty, and might be trying to get his crown back. So he might be raising an undead army. So you still think you need my help? You could try the new name."

"He nearly killed me last time." Morgana winced, "I could still use the back up. He's a very old lich. He's been gathering power all this time..."

Sin smiled and snapped the book shut, causing it to collapse into the runestone again. She pocketed it and nodded, "I won't leave you hanging. If it's okay, godmothers."

Lydia nodded, "Go. Maybe Caerlorne can afford to pay you what you're actually worth."

Morgana stood up stretching, "Of course. We are not a poor city. Your help will be appreciated."

Sin frowned, "You want to go right now?"

"What do you wish to bring?" Morgana asked, and Sin ran up the stairs, "Come on, you can wait in my room as I put it together."

Morgana followed her, grateful to escape her godmothers.

Episode Twenty Six: Kim vs Solomon II

She ate the sandwich in one hand, as she filled out the paperwork in the other. There was always more paperwork to be done. Requisition forms, work approvals, and all the code signoffs. That was what most of her job was supposed to be. She was the head of the workshop, it wasn't an expectation that she'd actually do any of the tekmancy herself.

"Huh. It's smaller than I thought it would be."

Kim closed her eyes, whispering to herself for strength, and then turned around, looking at the boy, and smiled, "What brings you here, Solomon?"

He shrugged, holding out a sheet of paper, "I need a few specialist parts for something I'm building."

Kim took the form, glancing down it, "Some of these are fine, but not all. It'll be expensive... What do you need with an ifrit cannister? That crap is unstable. Controlled substance."

He nodded, "I heard you like to know, that there's an application. I brought some of the paperwork... But you'll want to bring me back another day, right?"

"Nah." Kim waved at a seat, "My workshop. There's no need to have an appointment. That'll just make me later than I am. Show me what you're thinking."

He placed a folder on the desk, "You know I am sorry about the other day."

"Sucking up is going to hurt your efforts, not help."

He smiled, "Had to say it. I... I've been building this."

He spun a drawing around to her. It was some sort of system designed to sit on someone's head, with a series of interlocking and shifting glass panes that seemed to arrange themselves automatically.

"The power source is unique. A purified form of the energy given off by an ifrit." He said, laying out a process sheet, "There's one or two steps missing from the plans, but if you insist I can tell you. But... Trade secrets."

Kim looked over the designs slowly, and looked up at him, "You're attempting to build some sort of adaptive golem display. Is this a new kind of pilot's helmet, so that they can look around and see outside the golem?"

"It started that way, but not anymore." Solomon said excitedly, "More general than that, now. It could be adapted and installed into any interface that makes use of a golem display. I was thinking, mostly, it could be used as a way of... Augmenting the world around you. Look at a piece of fruit, and the display can tell you the size and weight, name, etc."

Kim blinked, "Impressive. Inventive. You'll need some serious coding to make it work. And it has to be faster than most current golem cores. Speaking of, there's no core in these plans."

"I'm still working on that." Solomon said slowly, and frowned, "That's... Can you keep that out of the official documentation? Keep it secret?"

"The Interlink." Kim stated flatly, "The golem core has to be ridiculously powerful, which means big. So you've been attempting to reverse my process for the Interlink, so that you can hook up multiple of these interfaces to one central core per city."

Solomon flushed, "Uh... Yeah. I guess it was obvious, then."

Kim shrugged, "Can't help you with that. Obvious to me. I've been building a large core to interface into the defense force, using my Interlink. I have also noticed messages in the Interlink, not sent using my

own devices. Might have less interference. I was wondering who was testing.”

Solomon smiled slowly, “So you think it can work, then?”

“You’re not a witch.” Kim stated flatly, “You can only do the plans. Someone else has to do the actual building for you. I won’t be approving anything dangerous until I meet them, and can determine that they’re capable of doing it without blowing themselves up.”

He nodded, “Sure. My current patron is Ogrinfeld, they’re still assigning me a witch, but I’ll find out soon. I guess I’ll come back, then.”

Kim frowned, “You’ve got a few other things, first. For example, if you actually build this circuit here, you’ll disrupt the ability to form memories for the wearer. You need interference protection. Any of the basic recipes will work.”

Solomon quickly wrote a note on the plan, “Oh.”

“This is an audit.” Kim replied, “There’s a reason we do them. Mistakes get made... This won’t work. These two cell membranes? They’re powered by similarly charged runestones. They’ll just cancel each other out. You’ll need to do some sort of resonance feedback between them. Advanced, but the witch should be able to help you out if she knows what she is doing.”

Solomon nodded, “Sure. That makes sense.”

Kim looked up, “Any idea who Ogrinfeld is going to assign to you? They do have a number of research labs.”

“There’s two labs that are interested.” Solomon said slowly, “I’m not really supposed to tell you who, considering that the city is the patron, but they don’t have access to some of the materials I need, so they’re letting me set up a small lab here. The witch will be sent from one of them.”

Kim just looked at him in amusement, “And when I meet her, I’ll know exactly which lab. I’m not an unknown in the industry, and the industry is something I like to keep up with. Look, unless it’s a security threat, I won’t be saying much of anything to Chloe. It’ll go down on paper, and then get filed away in a sealed safe. Unless there’s an accident, nobody will know.”

Solomon smiled, “Sorry. Nervous investors. Nervous inventor, if I’m honest. Now I’ve shown you, I’m sure you could upstage me. Get it to market sooner.”

Kim frowned, “Well, I’m working on something much harder, and completely different, if that helps.”

She turned and pulled a well-worn plan out from a drawer and spread it out on the table, “What do you think of this, inventor?”

Solomon’s jaw nearly hit the floor as he stared, “That’s... That’s... Holy. You’re going to stick an Interlink signal amplifier in it? That means... The signals could cross leylines.”

“It’s already approved.” Kim smiled, “My Interlink is going to join communications between Wizeria, and Populous. If it works, we want to extend it to other cities. It could obsolete letters. Change a lot else, too. Change the entire world.”

He frowned, “How high up does that thing need to fly for it to work? I’m only seeing small rocket motors on it. It doesn’t have a fuel store.”

“No. It doesn’t.” Kim grinned, “Because we’re going to push it up higher than anyone has ever gone. Where the atmosphere is thin, and gravity is weaker. This device is going to float in orbit, like the moon.”

Solomon looked at her in surprise, “You’re... Talking about fiction. You can’t send things to space. The amount of energy to send things there is...”

"I've done the math." Kim replied, putting away her plans, "But like I said, I'm still working on it. Keeping the device powered is difficult. I've been working on some tek to convert sunlight into power, but its pretty useless. I'll need something else."

He sighed, "Well. I guess you've got more than enough on your plate not to steal my idea... And I do sort of trust you. I asked around. People really like you, Kimiko. It is looking, at this stage, that a new lab will get the contract. Decker Essentials."

Kim blinked, "Penny. Huh. Well, if that's the case, I expect I'll see a lot more of you and this idea."

Solomon frowned with concern, "Why? Is she not as good as people are saying?"

"She's my apprentice." Kim replied, shrugging. "Her godmothers have approved her studying under me, in a part time capacity, for the next couple of years. She's working on a way of combining auramancy and tekmancy. That's the general idea."

Solomon scratched his head, "You have time for an apprentice? Who lives in another city?"

"Transport isn't a problem." Kim shook her head, "Dan and Sin can take care of that pretty easily. It would be easy if Ogrinfeld and Wizeria could have an Interlink connection, but that's a while off. Also, Penny is pretty good. I'm just helping lead her research, not much more than that. She's a little reckless, but... She might be able to build your interface."

He breathed a sigh of relief, "So, I take it you don't think this is total stupidity?"

"I can't think of a use I would have for it." Kim dashed his dreams, "But maybe you can come up with something. But it should work the way you think it will, with a few changes. You might have it nailed down in six months or so."

He frowned and put his plans away slowly, "You don't think it'll be worth it."

"I think it has military applications." Kim growled, "A lot of them, and not much else. And I think Ogrinfeld thinks so, too. So, it might be worth it to them. If they're going to attack a city."

Solomon winced, "That is how I sold it to them. But that isn't what I want it to be for."

Kim smiled, "I've taken a couple military investors to get stuff off the ground before, kiddo. That's the industry. You're not going to get judgement from me."

"Wizeria's military is almost all golems." Solomon shook his head, "I guess they have a lot of work for you."

"It wasn't like that always." Kim smiled, "I made them that way. I built up our army into mostly magical constructs, protecting the pilots and completely obsoleting the usual attack forces that might hit Wizeria. I'm proud of it, even if I will feel utterly ashamed if someone actually gets attacked and torn apart by things I made and designed."

Solomon nodded, "We walk a fine line."

Episode Twenty Seven: Chloe vs Hunger

She didn't quite know what to do with herself. Usually she would go down to the dining hall and have breakfast alone. Except she wasn't allowed to eat for a few days. The curse had already started changing her to require... Stuff she shouldn't be thinking about.

Diana's sickly potion should fix it soon, but until then she was hungry.

She didn't like that thought. She was born to be a queen. She didn't know what hungry was. She knew that Sin could comprehend real hunger. Her friend knew what it was like to go without. This ravenous gnawing feeling in the pit of her stomach was nothing. She'd missed two meals. That's it.

Chloe sighed and walked to her office. The advisers would still be arranging their morning reports, but it didn't mean she couldn't get ready.

Various letters covered her desk. Most of them seemed inconsequential, but all of them could be the first sign of something that might be a significant problem. That was the task she had to solve every day. To see the future from these small grains of sand.

There were rumours among the outlying farms of a pestilence. Which was fairly normal. Moment anyone died everyone screamed plague. There hadn't been an actual plague under her rule. Diseases rarely got a chance to spread.

Apparently there was a troll in the city. Powerful magic users, obsessed with material wealth. They had a bad habit of eating children. Unfortunately, a troll's mirage was nigh unbreakable. However, it might not be a problem. Troll's had wandered through before, without attacking the citizens. Chloe would just raise the alert level.

Prince Sammeth of Populous was missing. The report scared the pants off her, and then she remembered that there was a very small tournament for Mana, the Chanelling, happening in Caerlorne. He was fine. Just skipping his duties like she did from time to time.

She would have loved to watch the tournament, but skipping Sin's godmothers didn't just seem difficult, but dangerous for one's health. The short and fat one, Prune, was hanging around the palace. Threatening to eat the staff, mainly.

Yet, Chloe knew she hadn't even been able to trap the vampire. The creature feared Sin's godmothers, on an instinctual level. The undead weren't a significant threat with a necromancer on hand.

There was also a personal invitation for her. A letter asking her to come to the Dead Forest at night, to witness a performance by a troupe of dead actors, directed by a walking disaster zone. She'd figured Sin had a personal project going, but not this.

"Your highness." Khan said, entering the office quietly, "You should be resting. The council is perfectly capable of protecting your people. We can bring the larger matters to your bedside."

"Not how this is going to work." Chloe replied, and turned to face him. She could see his nervousness. Hear his heartbeat. See the vein pulsing on his neck, begging her.

She was so... Hungry.

He smelled like food. Like she could tear his arms off like drumsticks. Rip that juicy pulsing mess right out of his chest. Crush his heart and pour the blood into her mouth. She hated him. There was no reason she shouldn't just eat him. Get rid of the problem, and her hunger.

"Assemble in the great hall, as always." Chloe instructed the walking flesh.

The meatbag left, shutting the door. As it clicked shut she collapsed, head hitting the table with a

solid thunk. This was so much harder than she thought it would be. She just had to get through, until the medicine started working. Then she would be fine. Which she knew was just a lie she was telling herself to try and cheer up.

She reached up and grabbed her nose, the room still smelled like food. Delicious and moist, making her stomach growl, biting her like it had grown teeth. It wasn't fair that everyone walking around her looked like an entree, and she had to fast.

A hand touched her shoulder.

Chloe spun around, grabbing the wrist as she flipped out of the seat, drifting up and behind the person, locking their own arm around their throat with a grace and speed that she had never known before. She landed easily, and felt a temptation to lean forward. To speak into their ear as she brushed her teeth against their neck.

She looked away with difficulty, "What are you doing here?"

"I heard you were sick."

She shoved the man away from her, and scurried under her desk, hiding her face behind her hands as she realised she'd just nearly eaten the guy that she kind of actually liked. She swallowed nervously, "I am. You're not safe alone with me."

He crouched in front of the desk, concerned eyes looking in at her, but all she could see was the pulse of his heart. Smell the sweetness of his blood. She wanted to break him. To rip him open. He wanted to give his heart to her, then she should take it.

"What? Why? What's the matter, Chloe?"

She fought back tears and wrath simultaneously, and gasped out the only word she could, "Vampire."

He fell backwards, scrambling into a bookshelf, staring at her from his prone position on the floor, "You're a vampire?"

"No." Chloe winced, "Well... Not yet. I'm being treated by the Animancy Coven, and the Necromancy Coven is seeking a cure. But... It's early. I still... Feel... Things..."

He breathed out nervously, "Do... You think they'll be able to help?"

"I got bitten yesterday." Chloe smiled, "I'm not dead yet, and I haven't... Done... That... So it's already helping a little."

Sammeth seemed to relax, and looked at her sadly, "So you don't trust yourself?"

"Not really." Chloe said, burying her head in her hands again, "Khan pisses me off... And you... You smell... Good. Sorry."

"I guess you do like me, then."

She looked up at him in terror, "How the Underworld do you get to that?"

"The origin of the vampire curse is a love story, a tragedy." Sammeth said, "Did you know that?"

Chloe shook her head, "No. I didn't."

"A man spurned a witch, for a peasant girl. The two were happy for a while." Sammeth said slowly, "However, the witch was a necromancer, and made a deal with... Something in charge of the Underworld. I don't really remember. She cursed the man, with three things. Firstly, he would kill his love. Secondly, he would live with the guilt, forever. Finally, he would never see the light of day again."

Chloe winced, "So what of that makes you think I actually like you?"

"I already knew it." Sammeth grinned, "But I smell more like food than anyone else. It's the curse. Trying to make you kill me. Because you like me. And I'm not going to listen to reason on that."

Chloe glared at him, and then sighed heavily, "Our lives are screwed up, Sammeth. Everyone else would want us married, for politics. To bind Populous and Wizeria together. I don't want to marry anyone for a reason like that. Even if I cared for you, that's the way the rest of the world would see it. Ogrinfeld would be insulted, and might even attack."

"If you cared." Sammeth said sarcastically.

Chloe stuck out her tongue at him, "And then there's the fact that I'm a witch. And I want to be a witch. Have you ever wondered why you never see a guy around the godmothers of the covens?"

"Not really." Sammeth shrugged, "I assumed it was a front. To remind people that all witches are female. Like the animancers pretend that they're flawless. That they don't eat, etc."

"It's because they can't take the temptation." Chloe stated, "When a marriage is... Consumated... On the wedding night... A witch loses her power. It's love or power, not both."

"Oh."

Chloe sighed, "And now... Now I'm sick. I might always be sick. Which probably means I could never have a kid anyways. So I need to worry about a plan of succession... And I can't offer any guy I might like a family... I.."

She gave up. It was too much. One of the reasons alone was too much, but all of them at once? She was a mess. She was allowed to be. Right now, she didn't see herself becoming much less of one for a while. Her life just... Sucked.

"Chloe?"

She glared at him, "Stop!"

He'd been about to move closer, to try and reassure her. His instinct was to offer her a hug, and if he touched her, she probably wouldn't be able to stop herself this time.

She frowned, looking at him frozen, "Are you okay?"

"I have stopped."

Chloe put a hand over her mouth, "Oh, crap. I hypnotised you, didn't I?"

"You hypnotised me, didn't you?"

She frowned, and reached for her wand, "Emeragus Diana."

Episode Twenty Eight: Dan vs Dan

“What... The...?” Dan asked slowly, staring at the ghoul. Drool tumbled slowly from its mouth, as the tongue’s full double handspan hung lazily down the side of its jaw. The unblinking eyes of flame gazed directly at her, into her. Into her soul. Which, was sort of a problem.

She hadn’t meant to do it.

Which mattered exactly not a mote to the ghoul, which immediately seized her shoulders and screamed rage and hatred into her face, flinging flecks of spittle, blood and flesh all over Sin’s face.

Because right now, Sin would be in her body. Well, hopefully. She couldn’t be quite sure that Sin’s soul hadn’t just been trapped in the ether, or that a spirit of some kind hadn’t got to Dan’s body first. Accidents like this was why the spell she’d been using were absolutely forbidden.

The ghoul was knocked back by a gust of fire, and Morgana stood in front of her, “Are you alright, Sin? You’ve never failed an interrogation before. Is he pushing harder?”

“So it wasn’t something Sin summoned, then...” Dan mused and then smiled up at the foreign witch, “Hi. We’ve met before. I’m not Sin. This is an accident. Please don’t kill me before I can explain.”

Morgana’s eyes blazed, and she cocked her head, “Your aura is familiar, and you do not appear to be the lich. Explain. Quickly, or I may damage Sin’s body.”

“I’m Dan. Dinerre de Amore.” She swallowed, “I was trying to separate the two sexes that inhabit my own body.”

Morgana smiled coyly, “Two. You haven’t told your friends that. They all think you were attempting to become male.”

“I was.” Dan winced, “I don’t have time for you not to trust me. I still was, when I cast the spell. Sin knows about it, but she’s the only one, I think.”

Morgana relaxed, and torched the ghoul. “You prefer Dan?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Dan...” Morgana sighed, “Sin and I are in pursuit of an ancient lich who appears to be able to defy the binding of his name. We’ve confirmed it is him. He might also attack the city tonight.”

Dan glared, “Why wasn’t I told? You need me and Kim if Wizeria is under attack.”

Morgana face palmed, “Look out the window.”

Dan walked over, and winced. She opened the glass doors and stepped out onto the balcony. This felt like a palace, and it was looking down on a city. There was still desert outside the walls, stretching as far as the eye could see. Yet, she did not recognise the strange tiled roofs, or the lanterns lighting the streets below.

She turned around slowly, “Oh, crap.”

Morgana nodded, “Yes. Welcome to Caerlorne.”

Dan walked back in, “I need to find a way to contact Sin. Right now. I don’t think the normal methods for talking to my body are enough. Another spirit might have taken it, because we both jsut travelled a bloody long way.”

“Use my mirror.” Morgana waved to a tall piece of glass.

Dan walked over to it, tentatively touching the runes engraved into the edges, and breathed out slowly, “Seriously? You have a Morguin Mirror?”

“Really?” Morgana replied, “Sin didn’t even react. Actually, I think she owns one. She knew how to make it work. Mostly spent the time looking at a dinosaur in a nest, if you would believe it.”

Dan slapped her face, “Of course she did. That’s my pterodactyl. Which meant there was a limited scrying aura in my house.”

Morgana looked over at her, “Oh. So Sin screwed up your spell?”

“No. It’s my fault.” Dan sighed, “Sin checks in on me all the time. Always turns up in my room when I’m not looking. I should have accounted for her, but I didn’t. Oh, and I doubt Sin owns one of these. She just... Knows how to use magic. Instinctively.”

Morgana grinned, “Is it starting to feel strange yet, being in her body?”

“It did straight away.” Dan smiled sheepishly, looking down at Sin’s hands. “She’s got twice the mana reserves I do. I doubt she even realises how deep they go. Or if they have limits.”

Morgana sighed, “Well, that’s a boring response. Try and see if you can get her attention. It’s not just a Viewing Mirror. She should be able to see... Her own body... In a reflection.”

Dan touched a half dozen symbols, expertly navigating the spirit realm to her bedroom, where she had been casting. It was still full of lit candles, and glowing crystals. What she didn’t see, however, was her own body.

“Oh, Sin. Where have you got to?”

Morgana laughed, leaning on her shoulder and reminding her that Sin was shorter than she was. “She spent all that time looking at the dinosaur, and now she looks like you.”

Dan turned the mirror off, and sat down glumly. She reached up and tapped the clasp on the hat. She wouldn’t be able to confirm it actually was Sin that ended up in her body this way, but it was better than nothing.

“Sin. He’s tired. Stop flying.”

Morgana frowned, “I’ve noticed Sin do that. Does it mean something? Or just a habit of Wizerian witches?”

Dan popped her cheeks, “An invention of Kim. It lets us talk to each other. It might not work across leylines, but Caerlorne is on the edge of the same one as Wizeria, isn’t it?”

“Close, but no.” Morgana smiled, “Caerlorne is on the intersection of all the leylines.”

Dan looked up, “And you brought Sin here? Were you wanting things to blow up?”

Morgana glared, “That is not something to tease about. Sin is the necromancer. She deserves more respect, especially from someone she considers to be a friend. You don’t know me, and you’re treating her like this?”

Dan smiled, “Wait for it.”

Morgana cocked her head, “Wait for what? There is nothing to realise.”

Dan leaned back, counting down the seconds in her head. Sin’s head. It did really feel strange to be in someone else’s body. Everything about Sin was smaller. More frail. How did she manage to not break bones in this fragile thing? Leaving that aside, she was fairly certain that if she had turned up in Sin’s body all alone, she might have been a little wild, too. She couldn’t hold it against her.

“Dan.”

She smiled up at her own body, “Took your time. See, Morgana?”

The witch in black nodded slowly, “How did you know that Sin was looking in on us? To hear the insult?”

Sin blew up Dan’s hair, “Because I always do. Doesn’t mean you get to be so mean.”

Dan rolled her eyes, “Right, and you would have willingly put Brutus back in his nest?”

It was weird to see such an embarrassed pose on her own body. Weirder yet to see Sin’s cute actions on a body that couldn’t decide if it was more feminine or masculine. It confused the heck out of her.

Sin sat down next to her, “So, I burned most of your mana getting here. Can you switch us back?”

Morgana covered a laugh.

Dan winced, “I... Didn’t do it on purpose.”

Sin spun to stare at her, “Wait, what? You actually screwed something up? What were you trying to do this time? You only mistakes about -”

The witch cut herself off and took a deep breath, “So how do we fix this? Not that I mind being bigger, but you got like, no magic.”

Dan felt her face flush red, “That’s what you notice about me? I tried to get rid of those things!”

Sin smiled sheepishly.

Morgana sat down across from them, “Amusing, truly. But have you forgotten that an angry lich is attacking tonight? We need Sin’s mana reserves.”

Dan frowned, “It’ll take me days to work out how to reverse this. And I’m an animancer, not a necromancer.”

“You got my body. It knows how to do necromancy.” Sin replied, shrugging, “So I guess you need to do stuff for me.”

Dan looked at her flatly, “I can raise the dead about as well as you can make a flower bloom.”

Sin grinned, “You’re cute when you’re mad.”

Episode Twenty Nine: Sin vs Morgana

Dan was a thoughtless, talentless, stupid ass.

Sin had given up stamping her foot in frustration with how terrible the attempts at necromancy were. Her foot hurt. Dan's foot. Why did Dan have so little magic? It sucked. At this rate, they'd have to run away from the monsters, rather than reminding them that witches are witches, and just because a lich had magic did not mean that he was boss.

It didn't make much sense to her. She knew Dan had plenty of magic. She'd seen the woman in tournaments for years. She'd been disgraced whilst Dan rose to the top of the animancy coven. One day, Dan would be the head of the coven. How could someone who was all but guaranteed to become a godmother have so little magic to hand?

It had to be something to do with the swap. Something to do with how there was now a soul and body with different magical affinities. Maybe that was why Dan was acting like a complete dunce.

There was an easy way to find out.

"Do you have a seed somewhere?"

Dan spun around, "No. You can't."

"I can if this body likes animancy more than necromancy. If I can't, then maybe I can excuse your total failure to even see a ghost." Sin snapped, glaring.

She was upset with Dan. Not just because of the poor timing. She felt violated, being shoved into someone else's body. Especially one that wasn't even a girl. It might have girl parts, but it wasn't a girl's. Not anymore. Dan might not understand it herself, but she wasn't always going to be a her. She was changing.

Dan sighed pulling out Sin's wand, and started intoning again. Sin gritted her teeth, trying to stop from screaming. The spell wouldn't work that way. She walked over, straightening her own wrist, and lifting her neck, and broadening her shoulders. "You are dealing with things that can understand you! Just because they're dead does not mean that don't want some bloody respect!"

The hedgewitch leaned up against a wall, shaking her head. She knew that necromancy was difficult. She hadn't been able to do much with it in her first few years. She was being harsh with Dan, but she was the one who had decided to interfere in a warzone.

Morgana leaned beside her, watching the witch practice, "Is it okay for her to waste the magic? We need it."

"It's useless to us if she can't use it." Sin whispered quietly, "Unless you have any other ideas? I'm... A bit upset. Not seeing things clearly."

Morgana smiled, "Return to the male form. It would be somewhat disturbing."

Sin glared at her, "Return?"

"Just an expression." Morgana said off-handedly, letting know that it was in no way, shape or form an expression. Not that it would make much sense. All people were born female first. The male was a mutation. Might be necessary, the entire race depended on both male and female halves, but the world rarely cared about things like that.

Morgana tapped her fingers on the wall for a moment, "There might be another solution, actually. A link. Linking is difficult, and uses a great deal of mana, but once it is done, you will both be able to use the mana of the other one, to a certain extent. Faster than waiting for that body you now wear to recharge."

Sin smiled sadly, remembering flying in the skies, alone with the pterodactyl. Dan had given her a beautiful gift, if only for a moment. She would miss that moment. However, she had things she needed to do. People that were relying on her to turn the tide against a total unknown.

“Linking is permanent.” Sin whispered, “Dan will always be able to feel what I feel. To know where I am. Some who have linked have even managed to exchange thoughts, at times.”

Morgana smiled at her, “Is that a problem?”

“Yes.” Sin stated firmly, “It is.”

The witch laughed, “Not going to elaborate, are you?”

“I know who you are.” Sin replied, shaking her head. “I don’t know how, or why. But I do know your name. Hasn’t changed too much. Helps when you don’t move around a lot. Which means I also know that you are about as trustworthy as a rose. Beautiful, but will stab you, if you’re not careful.”

Morgana chuckled, “Yes. That sounds about right. Though, of course, you know that I can guess. Certain private thoughts and emotions that it would be better that Dan not be constantly exposed to.”

“You’re a witch.” Sin said angrily, “You know that I’ll make the choice to protect this city, over my own privacy and happiness, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Morgana nodded slowly, “Though, if you have another solution, I’ll take it.”

“Kim might help, but it won’t help a lot.” Sin mused, “She could make maybe a dozen golems, this close to all the leylines. Better than nothing.”

“Chloe?”

Sin gritted her teeth, “No.”

Morgana nodded slowly, “I am sorry about her health.”

“She’ll be able to start casting again, in a few weeks.” Sin sighed heavily, “If anyone can break the curse, it’ll be Hera. My godmother dwarfs my ability with magic.”

Morgana smiled at her, “I do remember.”

Sin sighed heavily, taking Dan’s white hat off her head and spun it idly in her hands, “How do you do it, Morgana? Keep fighting for a city for this long? When they barely appreciate you at all?”

“The witch burnings get old fast.” Morgana agreed, “But they are my people. I’ve become more attached to them, over the years. Not less. I adore them. I love them, faults and hatred and sporadic plagues. I take the good with the bad. Some witches speak as if we’re denied love, but we’re not. We may not be able to have our special one without losing our magic, but we can have cities and generations of people that are all our own.”

Sin looked mildly amused, “Romantic view, for someone as old as you.”

Morgana shrugged, “I wouldn’t have lasted this long without a little romance.”

Dan sighed, turning, “What are you two talking about?”

Sin glared at her, “Practice. Or you and I will have to link.”

Dan spun back around, fear written on Sin’s own features as she tried desperately to cast, causing the spell to blow back in her face, singeing her hair. Sin glowered. Her hair might look unkempt, but she did try to take some care of it. Dan might even have burned her eyebrows.

Morgana leaned on her shoulder, “You know who I am, then? Fully.”

“Only a little.” Sin replied, “I’m not sure I can learn five hundred years of history in the space of a few days. You’re complicated. I can’t judge you, Morgana. I won’t.”

“That wasn’t my fear.” The witch replied, “Rather, I was thinking of a promise I gave my godmother.”

“You mean your older sister?” Sin replied, “Morgause?”

Morgana’s face drained of colour, “Where did you hear that name?”

“I read it. In the Eternal Library.” Sin shrugged, “They have a lot of pretty books. Old books, too. Including the coven history of the Morrigan. Morgause’s godmothers were Baba, Macha, and Nemain. Interesting family history.”

Morgana’s hands curled into fists, and she glared at Sin, “Never speak any of those names again. Do you understand me? You risk death by -”

“Speaking the names of the people who murdered me last time around? And the time before that?” Sin sneered, “Yeah. Don’t much care, Morgana.”

The witch went very still, “How... How do you know all of this? From the Library?”

“No.” Sin shook her head, and smiled over at Dan, “Memories. There was a reason the animancers teased and bullied me. Not just because I was a bad witch. Because I was a bad witch and used to tell stories that no one believed. That I would one day be the best witch in the whole world.”

Morgana relaxed slowly, “You mean it, don’t you? You play around and laugh so much. Everything is a game to you, but you know who you actually are.”

“I am Sin.” She snapped, “That’s my name, Morgana. No matter what has happened, no matter what will happen. I am just... Sin. The little witch who serves the lower quarters of Wizeria.”

“You were born here.” Morgana insisted, “Caerlorne is supposed to be your home.”

“Fun for a visit.” Sin replied, holding out her hand and concentrating, causing a small spiral of air to begin moving in the palm of her hand, “Hate to live here, though.”

“You’re just going to reject your entire legacy? Just like that.”

“Just like that.” Sin insisted, and then sighed, “Done trying, Dan. We cannot afford any longer. Urtr is on his way.”

Dan’s shoulders slumped and she turned around, “So... We have to link, then?”

“Or I could let you try animancy and blow up every leyline in the world.” Sin grinned, “That sounds kinda fun.”

Dan swallowed nervously, “You know linking with me... Is going to be dangerous, right? Even if we share bodies to make it easier.”

“You’re depressed. I get depressed.” Sin shrugged, “You’re not sure about your gender or sexuality or any of it. I know. Also, Morgana, if you tell anyone about this, I’m telling Morgause on you.”

The dark-skinned witch backed away, hands in the air, “Please stop saying her name.”

Sin grinned at her, “She’s as mean as ever, I take it. Good. That was a real threat.”

Dan looked between them, and back to Sin, “One day you’ll have to tell me how you manage to intimidate everyone around you whilst remaining cute.”

Sin stepped towards her, faces almost touching, “One day, I’ll let you ask that question and mean it.”

Dan swallowed nervously, “We don’t need to be this close to link.”

“Just looking at my pores.” Sin said innocently, reaching up and touching her own face gently, “I think I’m about to have a breakout from the stress. That sucks.”

Dan was barely breathing at all.

Sin smiled and wrapped the first layer of the spell around the both of them, “Duo en unum!”

Episode Thirty: Kim vs Boredom

“What is it?” Solomon asked as she placed the mirror in front of him. Six rune stones grew out of the table’s surface. Small, no larger than a fingernail. Kim grinned at him, “These four move you around, and these two let you look left and right.”

Solomon sighed, “A new kind of viewing mirror? Or an adventure game? Because if it is the latter, I could never get into those.”

He was answered a moment later as words appeared floating in the middle of the mirror. He sighed heavily, “Do I have to play?”

“I promise, this is nothing like any adventure game you have ever played.” Kim grinned, “In fact, I don’t think it is like an adventure game at all. We’ll have to call it something new.”

Solomon slumped in the chair, waiting. Right up until a ghoul appeared in view and attacked, visibly cracking the mirror. He jumped, backing away, “Turn it off!”

“Dude.” Kim blew her hair, “It’s still a game. That’s not real. It hasn’t even cracked, it’s just an image projected by the game.”

The mirror turned red, and faded out with the words, “You died. Try again?”

Solomon turned to her slowly, “You’ve found a way to project three-dimensional images that don’t actually exist. How?”

“It’s a simple-ish technique.” Kim shrugged, “Converting three dimensional objects to two dimensions by measuring what the view from the mirror should be. It uses about half the memory of the mirror, the other half of the mana capacity plots your movements and the monsters.”

Solomon leaned forward and tried to play, quickly being massacred before he could fully grasp the controls, but he lasted long enough to run away, this time. He frowned, “What about being able to fight back? I don’t want to just run away.”

“Another rune appears when you earn the ability to shoot.” Kim nodded, “I couldn’t get melee working properly, so it’s mostly projectile weapons. Magic, and bow and arrows, that kind of stuff.”

“Every half-serious tekmaner is going to want to get one of these.” Solomon shook his head, turning to her, “This is amazing.”

Kim grinned at him, “You’re thinking too small. I’m pretty sure that because it requires no magical ability, or knowledge, and is pretty easy to learn... Anyone might want one of these.”

Solomon tapped his chin, “This is... Revolutionary. Amazing.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet.” Kim grinned, putting a second mirror on the table. As she did a yellow rune rose up out of the table between them. She tapped it, and a message appeared on both screens.

“Activate Interlink Connection?”

Solomon put a hand to his mouth, “What? These things can talk to each other? What does that do?”

“Click ‘yes’.” Kim instructed him, as she agreed to the question on her own screen. As she did, the game restarted, and she walked her character in front of his and turned around.

Solomon stared, “I can see something that isn’t a monster.”

“That’s me. Or my character.” Kim replied, “Want to crush some monsters together?”

“I want to swear.” Solomon breathed out slowly, watching as Kim expertly began killing the beasts that were approaching them, tapping away on the runestones with a practiced hand. She’d spent so long

creating and recreating and designing and debugging that she knew exactly where everything was, and exactly how to kill it all.

It wasn't the easiest thing in the world, and the game would still punish her if she got distracted, but she enjoyed the heck out of it. The idea of the Interlink had actually come up because when she was working on it the other tekmanagers tended to gather around her, watching. It was fun to watch someone else play, but it was more fun to play with them.

Solomon was moving as quickly as he could, but he wasn't a practiced hand yet. He was fighting away, and being a useful distraction for some of the monsters, whilst she took out the bigger and tougher ones.

"Cannot proceed. Lacking blue crystal." He read slowly, "Wait. You put puzzles into this? Seriously? I can't understand the coding on that. You have to track the views, the monsters and how they behave, and some kind of... Player inventory."

"Already had an inventory. Your weapons." Kim replied, "Adding to it wasn't that hard. You can hold nine items, which does take up nine of the memory blocks, and this device does only have about two hundred memory blocks, unless you buy extras. The game usually uses about a hundred and fifty, so it isn't a problem. I've slimmed it down as much as I can. Reusing assets, and combining them in memory and so on."

Solomon nodded, "Well, I have to say, I love it. How much for one of these?"

"Not for sale, yet." Kim replied, her eyes focused on the gigantic demon in front of them as she dodged fireballs, "See, I know the controls and everything work for this game, so it should be able to work for others. Same game, but different level layouts, and monsters and so on."

"You're trying to generalise it." Solomon nodded, "To make the expense hurt less, and to make it easier to make the next versions. That makes sense. Doing that with magic circuits though, has to be hard."

"Difficult, not impossible." Kim agreed, "I'm thinking that the game should be stored on a crystal shard, and if there's one in the mirror, it automatically tries to load the data in the same way each time."

Solomon shrugged, "Sounds like you've got it handled. So why call me in?"

"To fight monsters." Kim replied, "I thought it would be fun."

He laughed, "And here I was, thinking you wanted my business sense."

"Your business sense is telling you to invest, already." Kim replied, "That's not a question. I could put this in front of a dozen people, and half of them would agree to pay whatever I asked. The other half would call me a nutcase, but there's always idiots. I already have investment, though."

Solomon nodded, flinging a flurry of arrows into the center of a floating eye, "You are right, though. This is really good fun. I can see a few ways to make it more fun, like jumping or being able to look up or down, but they're probably massive technical hurdles."

"For the next game." Kim agreed, "This one is almost ready to go on sale. Just need to work out the sharding system properly, so that the next game can come with custom circuits if I find I need to extend the base system."

Solomon took the end level flag and plunged it down through a skeleton, winning the level for them. He grinned, and then his face fell as he compared his score to the high scores displaying. "These aren't real, are they? More like goals?"

"We're connected to the Interlink, so they're real." Kim retorted, "See the highest score, CHO? That's Chloe. She's holed up in her room at the moment, so I took a prototype up to her. She absolutely blitzed

my score.”

“The queen is the best player so far?” Solomon laughed, “Not exactly proper is it?”

“I don’t want people to think of this as a think for the tek crowd.” Kim shook her head, “If even a queen has fun with it, then anyone who can afford one should be able to enjoy it. Plus, there’s a couple stallholders who have asked for coin-based versions. One coin per life, or something like that.”

“You’ve talked to a lot of people.” Solomon said, sounding hurt, “Why haven’t I heard even rumours, yet?”

“A contract.” Kim replied, “Which literally prevents you from talking about the game to anyone who hasn’t signed it. If anyone else is in earshot, you won’t be able to say what you mean.”

Solomon frowned, “You going to make me sign it?”

“Nope.” Kim relaxed as she died, “I trust you, for some reason. Also, I’m announcing it tomorrow, with a public game tournament. Anyone can play, but the moment you die, your turn is over. I’ll have four of these Interlink’d.”

Solomon sighed, standing up and stretching as he died as well, “Well, you’ve outdone yourself. Nicely done.”

“I did it for fun, not gold.” Kim shrugged, and turned to him, “So, was it fun?”

Solomon nodded, “Awesome fun. But, I guess I better get back to my own invention. Speaking of, if you could build a game version for that... And Interlink it... We could have people running around in an arena fighting make believe monsters.”

Kim frowned, “I’m still not convinced you can make it work. The power source is going to be a significant problem. I’m going to open the coding module for this, so Penny should be able to build an interface... But I don’t know.”

Solomon sighed, “Yeah, I know. Ambitious.”

“By the way, remember talking about how military contracts always get funding?”

“Sure.”

Kim grinned, “I sold this as a training emulator to them. Replacing monster assets with golems and soldiers.”

Solomon laughed, “Wow. They actually bought that? They’re nothing alike. I’ve been in war. It isn’t so pretty. You actually care when something hits you.”

Kim shrugged, “They did. Which got me the gold to be able to build the first few prototypes. But, as you’re thinking of buying one, I think that the final generalised versions will probably be about a hundred silver.”

“Crap.” Solomon winced, “That’s expensive.”

Kim sighed, “I know... But the hardware alone is eighty silver for me to mass produce in the factory. Without the custom tooling I had to build to make them. It’ll take me a little while to earn back the investment.”

He nodded and stepped towards her, “I get it... But you don’t have to just talk business with me.”

Kim frowned, looking him up and down, “Then... Ask me out.”

Solomon blinked, “What?”

“I’m not asking you on a date.” Kim stated, “If you want that kind of relationship with me, and I think you do, then you have to be the one to ask me out. Show me that I won’t be the only one making an effort.”

Solomon frowned, “I... Can I think about it? Or is this a one time offer?”

Kim sighed and turned away, “I guess you can think about it.”

“I just don’t want to accidentally cause a war. I’m still an inventor from a rival city. If they think you’re trying to poach me, it’ll cause political problems. And I don’t want to see your home burn.”

She sighed, “I hate that politics touches my life. Really. Like a golem core blowing up. But, fine. I get it.”

“I was telling you I want to.” Solomon offered sheepishly.

She turned and smiled, “I get it. I might not like it, but I get it. I guess Sin is rubbing off on me. She acts first, considers second, or third, or not at all.”

Solomon winced, “Sounds like a dangerous way to live.”

Maybe it was.

Sin always seemed to be able to pull it off.

Episode Thirty One: Chloe vs Diana

As Diana took the blood sample, Chloe fought with the very nearly overwhelming desire to hiss at the woman and then jump into the air, turn into a bat, and fly down the hallway. Which was impressive, considering she didn't know how to turn into a bat.

The animancer held a vial up to the light and shook it. Black flakes appeared and began sinking to the bottom of the glass. Diana sighed, "You remain sensitive to light. I recommend you continue to avoid direct exposure. What about your fangs?"

"They're bigger." Chloe said, reaching up and touching the teeth that no longer fit in her mouth. They were beyond hiding, so she had glamoured herself around the staff and was refusing to see strangers. The people wouldn't like it, but they would like a vampire queen even less. Burning her at the stake sort of less.

Diana lifted her chin roughly, musing to herself, "I would say we have six months before the curse fully engulfs you. Probably three until you will be unable to resist the urge to kill. It appears to be accelerating. I am uncertain why."

"Exposure." Chloe winced, "One of my suitors. I do actually like him... But the vampire -"

"Understood." Diana held up a hand. She didn't comment, but Chloe knew the woman was disgusted by the idea of a witch giving up herself to become like everyone else. No matter what that reason might be. Which was odd, considering she had a daughter.

"I've never asked before, and I won't command you to answer, but how are you Danniere mother?"

The woman frowned, hands settling quietly into her lap, "You may not tell my daughter."

Chloe sighed, "I hate secrets."

"Danniere was not conceived in the usual fashion." Diana continued, ignoring that Chloe hadn't agreed to her terms. As if the witch was desperate to get it off her chest, "She is the culmination of the Animancy Coven. Nearly a thousand years of our history lead to her birth."

Diana smiled sadly, guiltily, "I was chosen as vessel for a rite, when I was not yet one of the godmothers. I was like my daughter is now. A promising apprentice, who would become a godmother one day. The rite took two years to perform. I was kept in isolation all that time. No food or water or freedom was given to me. I was sustained by magic alone, chained in place."

Chloe wasn't sure she wanted to hear the rest. Her stomach was churning just at the thought of one witch doing something like this to anyone. Yet, an entire coven had sacrificed their basic humanity for the sake of this rite. She needed to know why. So she could find out if they would try, again.

"I gave birth to a daughter, the moment the rite ended." Diana said, breaking into a smile, "A beautiful baby girl. The hope of all of us. Danniere was born to lead the Animancy Coven, but she was also born to be the fulfilment of a prophecy."

Chloe winced, "No. You didn't."

"We we controlled everything." Diana said, looking down in shame, "That we created the vessel for Artur's return. But even among us, we cannot create life from nothing. It requires a seed, a soul."

The witch fought back tears, "Danniere's soul, is a half-soul. The other half remained in the child we stole it from. We did our best to care for both, so that they would continue to live, and they did, but for both to thrive, they needed each other. They only thrive together."

Chloe looked at the woman, feeling betrayal and hatred and distrust. "You took Sin's soul."

“They are each other.” Diana sighed, “They cannot exist without the other. Even whilst they sometimes hate each other... They need each other to be whole.”

“This is why you didn’t fight for Sin, against her godmothers. They knew what you had done.” Chloe stated angrily.

“Yes.” Diana nodded, “In fact, apparently they were resurrected because of the rite we performed. We triggered a failsafe. And those three have done a miraculous job of protecting a girl, who has grown into a powerful witch, that I am so proud of... A witch that hates my very existence.”

Chloe looked at her, “And you made sure that Sin had no reason to doubt that hate. Because you know you deserve it.”

“Yes.”

The queen sighed, “You do. You deserve far more hatred than she has ever given you. You have done evil that if I had known, I would have executed your entire coven. If I didn’t need you now, I would. I’m still considering it.”

Tears began dripping down Chloe’s face as she felt the rage building, demanding that she kill the monster in front of her. “Dan is only half-alive because of you. Sin is half-dead because of you. She is a necromancy because you ripped apart her life. Literally. Your coven tossed aside all sense of decency to create an act so evil it shook the foundations of the Underworld and woke up the dead.”

“My godmothers were all killed that night.” Diana stated roughly, “Do not pretend to know whether the world has chosen to pass judgement on us or not, queen. You are about to join the undead. Are we any worse than your existence?”

“No. You’re not. You’re equal to it, and I am an abomination. I know I deserve death, Diana.” Chloe stated bitterly, “I am the least evil choice, that is all. That is the only reason I have not yet slit my own throat.”

Diana sighed and looked down, “Nothing you have said is false. I cannot allow you to destroy my coven. I assume you understand why.”

“I wouldn’t. I’d tell Sin.”

Diana looked up at her, “And that child is a threat to us? Her failures are my own, but she is a failure.”

“No.” Chloe grinned, “No she is not. Because you morons actually found the incarnation of Artur. You didn’t need to do the rite. In fact, you probably screwed up the prophecy whilst you were at it.”

Diana looked at her in confusion, “No. Hyacinth is of the bloodline, and that is why she was chosen. But that is all.”

“She’s slept over before.” Chloe rolled her eyes, “I’m pretty sure normal girls don’t have nightmares about five hundred year old battles.”

Diana looked at her true fear, and swallowed, “The necromancer... Is the reincarnation of Artur?”

“Not anymore.” Chloe shrugged, “You ripped her soul in half. So now, there are two.”

The animancer winced, “We have broken the cycle, then. We have failed.”

“I can’t forgive your actions, but you’re my healer. I guess I’ll just wake up dead when I become too inconvenient to you.” Chloe sighed and waved a hand, “Leave. Before I tear open your veins.”

The animancer left in a swirl of light, immediately. No arguments.

Chloe breathed a sigh of relief and dropped onto her bed. She really had been about to eviscerate the

woman. She had hurt her friends more than anyone would be able to fully understand. She wanted to taste her. To feed on her death.

The queen touched her fangs gently. They were so sharp just touching the tip would pierce the skin instantly. They weren't going away anytime soon, but it almost felt comfortable to have them, now. Her lower jaw had receded, making room for the new addition. Maybe this was just what she was.

A vampire.

She sighed, putting an arm up over her eyes. It was getting so hard to resist, that instinct. She knew she had to keep fighting it. That she could keep fighting it, for now. Even if the animancer was a twisted monster, she knew what she was doing. A full transformation was still months away. If Diana didn't poison her.

"Aw, you look adorable!" A voice piped up, "Are you Chloe? Are you my master?"

She sat up quickly, staring.

In front of her was a woman about her age, covered in stitch marks and grinning. She brushed her red hair and struck a pose, "Sin was making me for you! Sorry about the introduction. Sin is busy off in Caerlorne, so I broke out!"

Chloe winced, looking at her suspiciously, "You're... A zombie. Aren't you?"

"No heartbeat." The woman grinned, "But I'm the liveliest corpse you'll ever meet! Promise!"

Chloe put her chin in her hands. The no heartbeat thing was true. And this was a totally Sin solution to the problem of social isolation. Give her a friend she couldn't eat, and even if she tore them to pieces, wouldn't die either. It was like Sin was handing her a walking teddybear.

"Do you know who you were before you died?"

The woman cocked her head and put a finger to her lips, "Before I died? I wasn't alive before death. I mean, not all these body pieces belonged together. I guess you could say I was lots of people... But now, I'm me!"

Chloe laughed softly, "Right. So, my zombie babysitter, what's your name?"

"Sorry." The woman looked down, "I'm incomplete. Sin tried really hard to bind me to my room... But I got bored, and I miss her. She's so far away I can't even feel her magic."

Chloe looked at her, "You like Sin, don't you? I guess I might miss my mother, too."

"Gross." The zombie stuck out a forked tongue, "I don't like Sin like a mother. Seriously. Of all the images you had to stick in my head, it had to be that one."

Chloe couldn't contain it anymore.

She burst out laughing.

Episode Thirty Two: Dan vs Lich

Sin's wrath washed over her like boiling waves. They crashed over her, burying her beneath a mountain of shame. Tearing down every wall that she had spent years building up around herself. Her failure was on display, and Sin's hatred of what she had done was clear. The witch judged her, and she fell short. As she knew she would.

Dan fell to her knees, crying.

She didn't have a right to cry. She was the one who should be punished. Sin had every right to cry. She was the one who was betrayed. Dan had no right to feel so small and pointless, so broken. The world deserved to hate her. She was nothing but a sham and a fraud. She wasn't the perfect animancer.

"If you keep making that face on my face, I'll have to do something about it."

Dan nodded, wiping away her tears and stood up slowly, "I'm sorry."

Sin flicked her forehead, "Dummy. That's not what I mean. We've got no time. Lemme at my necromancy."

Dan breathed deep, steadying herself, and then pushed gently against the link inside her head, opening it like a follower. Layers peeled away, and she felt the mana begin to flow, connecting them both. She could feel the two kinds of magic flowing passed each other, separate, unable to be mixed.

Her own face grinned at her, "And now, you've got animancy, and my mana. Shall we go rip a lich's face off?"

She couldn't join Sin in either the excitement for violence, or the excitement for encountering a lich, especially one that could not be bound. That just seemed like the kind of fight when half the witches in the world should have been gathered to put him down.

"Don't be such a turnip." Sin stated, reacting to her feelings of caution, "There's three of us. And though Morgana sucks even worse at necromancy than you, she's not a bad animancer."

Dan remembered the dragon transformation potion from the competition, and raised an eyebrow at the witch, "So, what is your plan for defending your city, tonight?"

Sin grabbed her hand, "Boring. Creepius summonae!"

Skeletal hands grabbed her legs and dragged her down into the ground before Moragana could answer. Not that she could hear the answer over the screaming. She moved through the rock, tumbling, her only assurance the hand holding her own.

Dan burst out of the soil coughing up grave dirt, and slammed a fist into the ground, "Sin!"

Her body looked at her from nearby quizzically, "Yes?"

"We needed to talk about a plan."

"Don't be boring." Sin glowered at her, and then turned, "Welcome to the cemetery! He's been busy. Stealing bodies out of graves with the same summoning spell I used to get you here."

Dan stumbled upright, "Liches are experts in necromancy, aren't they?"

"Old ones are. He is old." Sin frowned, "Urtr. I know I looked him up in my Book of the Dead, but it never says much. I'm sure that I remember that name from somewhere..."

"Witches have come to die." A voice rasped as a fog sprang up around them, "Witches always come to die."

Sin rolled her eyes, “Oooh. So very creepy. Like a bag of dicks. Because that’s all you are. Amassing power, stealing bodies. Stuffing souls into them. You’re just a bag of dicks!”

Not a tactic that Dan would have used. Childish insults against a powerful entity wasn’t something she would have ever tried. Using magic against a lich required caution and forethought and it was apparent that Sin was as impulsive as ever and seemed to forget she didn’t have that much mana to call on.

An area of fog cleared, revealing a ghoul-ish figure in a cloak, with a burning aura of magic. It laughed, a rough and horrifying sound, and then pointed a finger, “You shall die slowly for your insolence.”

“You’re being boring.”

The lich froze up, confused. Sin put a hand on her hip, and repeated herself, “You are being boring.”

“Insolence!” The creature screamed, and then held up its hands, “Oblivia darkus!”

Sin waved her wand tiredly, “Mobius dimensia. Is that really it?”

The lich waved his hands before the blob he’d sent hit him, “Asvestus columbinus!”

Dan smiled slowly at Sin as she realised that this battle wasn’t actually about power. If they could end it before they ran out, it wouldn’t matter. This was a battle of skill, and skill was something she had. Because as Sin had her necromancy back, so too, did Dan have something of her own.

“Nunc germinare!” She pointed the wand, and vines sprang up out of the ground, attempting to seize the lich. He knocked them aside, poisoning them, but as he did, Sin shot forward and grabbed him by his chest bones.

The witch glared down at him, and then headbutted him.

The lich fell backwards in confusion. A witch wasn’t supposed to use a physical attack. They were supposed to hang back and cast magic after magic. Dan took the opportunity, casting again. Vines sprang up through the creature’s chest, tying him down to the ground.

“Et flore!” Dan shouted. The vines shivered and flowers began to bloom across the surface, releasing pollen that blocked one’s connection to mana.

Sin jumped backwards, out of the way, and smiled at Dan, “See. You don’t need to be boring. You just need to know what to do.”

Dan disagreed. Knowing what to do came from careful planning. This improvisation scared her, and she knew that the creature was far from bound safely in a circle. He was one angry burst of magic away from killing them, like he had been before.

The lich laughed, “You have no power here, Selene Arturaelorne. I was born to this place! I lived and died here. My soul belongs to -”

“Arnive.” Sin interrupted him, “Right? I knew I remembered your name from somewhere. You stole her, from Gor. Murdered Gor, really. But you loved Arnive more than anyone else. You promised her eternity together. You promised!”

The lich went quiet, “Arnive? Is that her name? The fleeting face I see at dawn’s first light. A beauty, unsurpassed.”

Dan was struggling. She knew the names. She didn’t know how Sin knew the names. Dan had spent years in her family’s library, pursuing the legend of Artur. Gor and Arnive were the parents of Morguin, and another unnamed witch. Well, rather her name had been burned out of the books. A king had killed Gor, and taken Arnive as his bride, and together, they gave birth to Artur.

Was Sin seriously suggesting they were fighting Artur’s father?

Sin knelt down next to the lich, “Arnive is gone. She’s waiting for you, beyond the veil. You stayed to protect her, but that time is over.”

The lich glared at her, “I know you, beast. You are the child. How can you live, whilst my love is dead?”

Sin touched the skull gently, as if stroking his cheek, but she didn’t say anything. Dan could feel Sin’s fear, but also her compassion. She really did care for the soul that had lost itself in the corruption of the lich. Sin was gentle, and kind, even for the dead who were trying to kill them.

The lich shivered, and then breathed out slowly, a blue light dispersing from its mouth for a moment. Dan looked at it in wonder. She had never heard of a lich giving up its life willingly, to move on. You had to either banish them, or destroy their soul. The never moved on.

Who was she?

Sin stood up and turned around with a grin, “Well, that was fun!”

Dan’s jaw dropped, “Wait, what? That’s all you have to say? What the heck just happened here? How did you know all that stuff about Arnive?”

“He was a warlord who kidnapped a princess, but then had two kids by her. They had a daughter and she didn’t conveniently die.” Sin shrugged, “So... He had to actually care about his princess. And being male, he probably swore some vow or another to protect her.”

Dan let it go. She could also feel the deceit and worry in Sin’s emotions through the link. She had a feeling she was about to learn just how often Sin lied to her, and she wasn’t particularly comfortable with that knowledge.

Sin paused as she stood next to her, looking down, “There are things it is better not to know, Dan. I’m sorry.”

Dan smiled at her, “Well, I caused all this. I guess I can take that.”

“Not all of it.” Sin sighed heavily, “I’m still ridiculously pissed off at you, so don’t forget that... But your mother is also kind of to blame. We were already linked, in a way. So when you tried to phase your body in and out, your soul jumped to me. Which kicked me back to yours.”

Dan grabbed her shoulders, “Stop being vague. This, I need to know.”

Sin looked up at her, “You don’t. You will hate yourself more than you do. And I am not losing you just because you feel the exact opposite of the way we all picture you. We know you have failings, Dan, but you’re important to me and Kim and Chloe. We need you.”

Dan shook her head, “I don’t care. You have to tell me.”

“No.” Sin refused, and Dan could feel the heartache across their bond. There was only one reason that the witch was being so stubborn. Whatever she was hiding, whatever Dan’s own mother had done, had hurt them both. It would hurt Dan beyond her expectations to know it.

“I will find out.”

Sin sighed, “It’d be better to die than that.”

Dan stepped backwards, screwing up her face as she fought back tears, “Why won’t you tell me? It’s important. It might explain...”

Sin glared at her, “No. It doesn’t explain my feelings. Or yours. And good luck pretending they don’t exist, now that I can feel them. I don’t understand why you won’t return them. I know you care.”

Dan turned away, "I'm an animancer. Things like that can't happen."

"So that's why you tried to become a boy?"

Dan felt her heart just about stop, and turned back nervously, "How... How long have you known?"

Sin rolled her eyes, "Dan. My first day of magic training, you went out of your way to tease me before we'd even tried anything. You insulted me before you even knew my name. Which meant I got your attention, and you were looking for an excuse to talk to me. You were an utter witch about it, but I knew what it meant. Even if you made me cry."

Dan flushed red, "So... Every time I hurt you..."

"You could stop doing that." Sin glared at her, "I do kinda hate it."

Dan sighed, "You know it can't happen. Maybe I'm just -"

"Building walls." Sin snapped, "I know. I also don't care. I accepted you as a friend, Dan. I'm not going to push. I told you how I felt at the tourney. When I kissed you as I blocked out the sun."

Dan clenched her fists, staring at the ground, "You're so... Embarrassing."

"I just know what I want." Sin replied, "And what I really, really want, right now... Is to not be in your body."

Dan nodded, "Let's go find Morgana."

"Since when do we need an escort?"

"She might have ideas."

"I'm in your freaking head." Sin kicked the dirt, "Fine. She might have an idea on how to fix your idiocy."

Episode Thirty Three: Sin vs Dan

Lydia looked over as she entered the house, and stifled a giggle. Sin glared at her, “Not one comment.”

Her godmother shrugged, “But you look so -”

“Regretus manifestus!” Sin snapped, cutting her off with a spell. Her godmother waved away the images of regret easily, and smiled at her, “So. How is Dan doing?”

“I hate her.” Sin replied, “And I’m now also linked. Because apparently she has next to no magic compared to me.”

Lydia sighed, and walked over, putting her hands around her shoulders, “Being a witch comes with troubles and tribulations. Necromancy more than most.”

Sin nodded stiffly, and looked down at the body she was wearing, “I am not staying stuck in this.”

Lydia frowned, “What terrible abomination are you planning, now?”

“I was thinking the Rite of the Homunculus, actually.” Sin looked up, “Then put Dan’s body on ice, until she can work out how to switch them properly.”

Lydia nodded slowly, “The Rite is difficult, and forbidden. Do you think you have the power to pull it off, today?”

“Nope.” Sin replied, “I’m probably going to need Hera’s help. She’s the only one of you has ever managed to pull it off, right?”

“She’s the only one brave enough.” Lydia corrected, “I probably have the power for it. The precision of the Rite is difficult. Do you really think you can get it right a second time?”

“Fourth.” Sin said offhandedly, and reached for a cup.

“What was that?” Lydia said, with a touch of anger. Sin turned around, “Hmm? What?”

Lydia glared at her, “Do you want me to bind you?”

“No.” Sin replied, and pulled some tea out of the box and put it into the mesh ball before dropping it into her cup. She tapped the cup twice, “Coques bulla.”

Hot liquid sloshed into the cup, and she picked it up, smelling it appreciatively. Her godmother sighed, “Why do you always to push us, Sin?”

Sin sighed, “I’m sorry, do I look like I’ve had a good day?”

Lydia shook her head, “I am not inactive, Sin. You are not the only person in this house. The least you could do is answer me when -”

“You don’t want the answer!” Sin snapped, “It’ll make you angry. You know that. So why don’t you just let it go? I’ve heard all the lectures. I know I’m just going to get grounded again. I don’t care. I’m pissed off.”

Lydia took a deep breath, tugging on her ponytail, “Hyacinth Ras-”

“I was with Morgana. Or Morguin, to use the name you knew her by.” Sin glared, “Fighting Urtr of Caer. You remember him to, I guess. He recognised me.”

Lydia swallowed nervously, “Sin... Some things you’re not ready to hear.”

“And some things I don’t give a flying fuck about!” Sin yelled, “I know who I am. I am Sin. Regardless of whatever reincarnation I was born as. Regardless of the fact that Diana ripped my fucking soul in half. I know. Okay? I fucking know!”

“Language.” Lydia stated, and shook her head, “What Diana did was stupid.”

“I hate her for it.” Sin replied, “I remember it, godmother. I remember lying there, as a toddler, as they hurt me. Over and over, for days. I remember when Dan first opened her eyes. I know I shouldn’t. That I was too young. But I still remember. So when Dan does something this stupid, imagine what I’m feeling.”

Lydia winced, “Like she’s stealing what is left. I guess.”

“Yes.” Sin nodded, “So shut up, and let me drink my tea before I give up and start rocking in a corner.”

Lydia sighed, “And when you’ve had your tea, you will apologise for being so rude.”

Sin walked away, “Nope.”

She stormed into her room, and kicked it shut, “Mulligis atrop.”

The witch tossed the white hat to the side, landing it expertly atop a pillar of her bed, and then flopped onto a pile of cushions, and looked at the hot liquid in her cup and burst into tears. She hadn’t been dishonest with her godmother, and she still couldn’t understand.

Dan was everything that had been ripped away from her life. She was the pieces of Sin that were missing, and always would be. Now that she had Sin’s body as well, her coven wouldn’t be letting her give it back. They would be trying to crown Dan as the saviour that they had all hoped she would be, before deciding that the experiment had been a failure.

Sin felt something wipe her cheek, and glanced over to see a small teddy bear riding Snowball like a horse. The cat yowled his displeasure at the disrespect, reminding her yet again that he had the soul of a lord.

Sin smiled at the both of them, putting down her tea and grabbed them in a cuddle. The cat tried to bend the dimensions and flip through them to escape her, like all cats could. She held him, crying quietly, and felt her teddy hugging her back even tighter.

She looked up at the ceiling, and let out a ragged sigh. Her life sucked. It always sucked, no matter how bright it managed to get. All she could do was get up and fix it. That was what her godmothers had taught her. It was not possible for things to get better if you let yourself stagnate.

Sin let the two go, and felt the bear crawl up onto her shoulder, and she picked up her tea, glaring at the surface as she tried another raw spell, “Muluiceps aperta.”

She navigated it easily to Dan, and saw her own body, lying on a bed and balling her eyes out into her pillow. Kicking her feet in a tantrum. This situation wouldn’t be helping the depression that Dan was struggling with. A mood that Sin could feel pushing down on her across the link.

She took a hold of the feelings in her head, quietened them, and pushed them back down the link. She saw Dan relax, and fall into her bed, exhausted. Sin smiled softly. She might hate the girl, today, but that also didn’t change how she felt about Dan. The girl might have stolen a piece of her soul to be born, but they were very different people. Sin didn’t want to imagine life without her in it.

She shifted the tea, looking in on Chloe. Which was a surprise, and a bad one. The queen was sleeping, hanging upside down from her chandelier. Sin had been thinking about constructing an artificial body for her, long before Dan had pulled this crap. Creating a living body to possess was hard, and dangerous. It was also unpredictable. The curse might be able to travel from Chloe’s human body and into the much tougher and more powerful construct, which would be bad for everyone.

She also noted that there was a zombie sleeping underneath her, curled into a ball, which was slightly concerning. She hadn’t thought they were alive yet. All the same, the basement the corpse had been chained in had been heavily warded against it getting out. Had it managed it, or had someone helped it?

Sin had also given some thought to it because of Dan herself. A body that could be male, just for her. The reason she'd given up, is because she realised that Dan's body was already artificial. It hadn't bent to the woman's will, because the woman wasn't sure if she wanted to be male or female or something else. Her indecision was what had caused the problem. Better to let her sort out her headspace before risking the world blowing up to create a new body.

Though, that was an interesting angle.

Necromancers had the Forbidden Rite to create an artificial frame for themselves. How did animancers pull it off?

"Bookshelf?"

The cursed object in her room groaned an acknowledgement, and Sin frowned, "Give me... Diana's diary. You know the one I want."

A book tumbled from the shelf, and she slid it over to herself with her foot. She flicked through the descriptions of the rite that they had performed when creating Dan. Most were incomplete. She hadn't been in charge of what had happened, and her godmothers hadn't told her the full implications. Which was animancers all over. Secretive assholes.

Sin paused, recognising a symbol written in one of the margins, and looked at it slowly, and with concern. It didn't belong in an animancer's diary. It was a tekmancy sigil. So their rite had made use of other magics, then. It made sense to adopt tekmancy.

Sin closed her eyes, probing the body she was wearing, and found what she was looking for almost instantly. Dan's magic had felt wrong, and weak. Now she knew why. The mana reserves were the same artificial buffers that Kim used when constructing golems. Which also meant that Dan could continue to cast even when the leyline was inaccessible.

Sin breathed out, opening her eyes calmly. She understood how the animancers had constructed this flesh. They had completely cheated, no wonder everything had gone wrong and killed the three godmothers looking after the rite.

They had tried to take a golem, and rewrite it to be living. An animancy approach, but stupid. You can't create life from no where. The animancers might think you can, but the life they create has lived before. They extract living energy from the memories of the world. Necromancers understood that. The forbidden rite she'd used to make her teddy worked by giving the world a new memory. An illusion, forced onto the world itself.

Sin stood up, stretching, and then stepped into the microdimension she had hidden in her room. She picked a few items off the shelf and tossed them into the centre of the study.

A nearby mannequin began arranging them silently, and she spoke as she reached for a book, "Thanks, Erod."

He inclined his head, "Always a pleasure to serve you, mistress."

"You know you don't have to stay here." She stated, "The others found a new place to live. I could take you there."

"I would prefer to stay close at hand." Erod replied drily.

She turned around and yanked a page out of the book and stuffed it into her mouth, forcing herself to swallow. She felt the body vibrate, and resonate with the pieces of the mannequin lying across the floor in the middle of the summoning circle.

Sin began to dance around it, "By darkest night, by brightest day, these three things unite. Of blood,

and bone, and sinew! Stitch the universe together, bring to life where there was none!”

She modified it as the rite began to crackle with power, “Take the two and switch them. Take the hoax and take the false, and swap their places. Flip them inside out.”

She blinked, watching as she saw Dan collapse in front of her. She smiled and looked down at the wooden hands, and rolled her shoulders, stepping out of the circle. “And now... Some customisation.”

Episode Thirty Four: Kim vs Solomon III

She fell onto the couch in the workshop, exhausted. Solomon was nearby, grabbing drinks from an cursed ice bucket. He flopped into a chair, and tossed the bottle to her.

Kim caught it and flicked the metal cap off, and took a swig, finally able to relax. She yawned, "I think we did well, today."

"The Kimiko Processor is going to be a crazy good success." Solomon said, leaning back, "Mostly because of you. You did well to psych the crowd up. There actually was a crowd, for a tek. That's new."

Kim let out a belch, and blushed. She was around a guy, after all. He might accept her as she was, but she still felt an urge to be more ladylike around him. She had really been angry at him, when she first met him. He was still irritatingly arrogant, but she found herself missing him when he wasn't around. She didn't even remember how he'd ended up helping with the launch.

Solomon beat her with a louder one, and slumped even further in the chair, putting his drink down beside him, "Any idea what the time is?"

Kim lifted her wrist, looking at the golem display, "Quarter past six. Why? You got somewhere to be?"

"Investors meeting at seven, tomorrow morning." He groaned, "I need to get going, I guess."

"Screw that." Kim waved, "I'll port you over. Relax. Heck, I'm probably going to sleep on the couch. Wake me up right before you need to be there."

Solomon frowned, "Isn't porting kinda hard? Especially for a tekmaner?"

"Dan's been teaching me." Kim explained, "Just because a witch is from a particular coven doesn't mean that they can't use magic from another. Just means it's harder to pick up."

He yawned, "That... Sounds awesome. Now if only I didn't have to go out and find a food stall."

"One day." Kim mused, considering the idea of using the Interlink to ask for food deliveries. That was the height of laziness, but it was the perfect way to spoil yourself. It might pick up, depending on which food vendors would agree to take part.

She pulled three silver coins from her purse and held them out, "Get me something too?"

Solomon laughed, and took them, hesitating as his hand brushed hers. He smiled down at her, "You're lucky you're cute."

Kim looked up at him, "Are you going to ask me out, yet?"

Solomon's shoulders drooped, "Let's just say the king isn't keen on the idea. I'd like to but -"

Kim grabbed him and pulled him down on her, and kissed him. She had promised herself that she would make him take the first step, but he was an absolute coward. She wanted him, and she was too tired to care about the political fallout.

He didn't pull away, but she could feel him holding back.

Kim broke the kiss and shoved him upright, "Now, go get some decent food."

Solomon turned red, and then nodded, "As you command."

She breathed out slowly as he left. That had probably been a really stupid thing to do. It wasn't just the huge political line in the sand that she had just stepped over. She was a witch. All of her skills were devoted to tekmancy. If she tried to make any sort of life with him in it, she knew she'd end up crossing a line that she just... Couldn't.

“Hey, Kim.”

She glanced over, looking in surprise as Sin started going through her equipment drawers. It wasn't Dan. She wasn't so carefree, and she certainly didn't know the first thing about teknomantic equipment. “I thought you and Dan switched bodies.”

“Did.” Sin agreed, “So I sort of possessed this body, for a while. Just looking for a couple things to upgrade it.”

Kim sat up slowly, “Wait. You made a body that can be possessed? From scratch? Sin. That's one of the holy grail's tekmancy. How the heck?”

Sin paused, turning around, “I modified the forbidden rite that let's you bring things to life. It's a pretty dangerous sort of thing. Not something that can be simplified so that you can have people fighting in artificial bodies rather than piloting golems in-person.”

Kim nodded, “So... Your godmothers angry?”

“They already were.” Sin rolled her eyes and went back to what she was doing, “They're going to be ten times madder by the end of the day, anyway. You got any higher capacity cores than this lying around?”

Kim blinked, “A blue? I guess theoretically you can make bigger, but never had the need. What are you doing with it?”

“Using it to channel me.” Sin shrugged, “I can deal with the latency, but I was really hoping to put together a core that would let me do casting without speaking.”

Kim stood up, walking over, “Do you mind if I do a scan?”

Sin waved a hand, “I've got this. Relax, Kim. I'll let you check out this body later. You have a date.”

Kim went bright red, “Is it a date?”

Sin chewed her cheek, “Huh. Never thought that you would hesitate if you wanted him. Actually, speaking of... Kim? Hold still.”

Sin grabbed her shoulders, eyes glaring at her, and she muttered a raw spell. “Muinmos mutirtnoc.”

The magic hit Kim, and she screamed, falling to the ground in pain, shaking. Every nerve slowly lit up like it was on fire. Every muscle cramped, cracking her bones as she writhed in the ground, just begging Sin to make it stop.

Sin patted her head gently, as sweat poured off her. Kim glared up, “What the fuck was that!?”

“You tell me.” The witch replied, “Since when do you get stuck in a trap? Let alone let someone put a glamour inside your skull?”

Kim swallowed nervously, “Say what, now?”

“Someone cursed you. So that you would see them a particular way.” Sin insisted, “Powerful hex. More than I'd expect most witches to be able to pull off. In fact... Is this... Troll magic?”

Kim stood up, clenching her fists as she put it together.

She turned towards the doorway, waiting for the asshole to return, as her magic slowly built up around her. “You probably shouldn't be here for this, Sin.”

“Miss you actually seeing what you kissed?” Sin giggled, “Like that'll happen. So how did he hex you?”

“He kissed me, without being asked.” Kim stated, “Asshole.”

Solomon stepped through the doorway, idly chewing on a skewer of meat, a plate of them in his hand. “Hey, Kim, I found something... Oh, another witch who works way too hard?”

Sin sat on one of the workbenches crosslegged, and put her head in her hands, “I’m a friend. A necromancer. By the way... Nice glamour.”

Kim’s spell hit the door, and the shutter slammed down into the ground as Solomon turned to run. He turned back, swallowing nervously, “Okay... Yes, I am a troll... I just... Didn’t think you’d... Talk to me...”

“Liar.” Kim replied, “There are ways to do that, that don’t involve bewitching. Because right now, you don’t mean dirt to me.”

Solomon glared over at Sin, “You broke it, how?”

She laughed, “You shouldn’t be taking your attention off her, troll.”

He turned back in time for Kim’s knee to enter his chest, knocking him over and shattering the illusion. The greasy, slime-covered creature wheezed, rolling onto its size. It stood up slowly, and breathed a lungful of dust towards Kim.

The particles were plucked out of the air by the electricity arcing around the witch. She held up a sphere in her hand, “Troll magic can’t touch me, right now. I wonder what will happen if I shove this down your throat.”

The thing that had been calling itself Solomon spun around and ran through the steel door.

Kim fell to her knees, “Damn it.”

Sin skipped over to her and crouched beside her, putting an arm around her, “Sorry.”

Kim shook her head, “It’s... For the best.”

“We’re all terrible at romance.” Sin sighed, “Chloe wants to eat hers. Yours was a troll. Mine won’t even admit they like me.”

Kim blinked back tears, and turned, “So you do like someone, Sin?”

The witch went red, and then nodded, “I... Was planning... On asking them... To let me tell people. When I’m done here. Which is why I need the core. They have some overprotective godmothers.”

Kim wiped her cheek, “Godmother? Sin... Do you like another witch? That’s almost as bad as me kissing a troll.”

“Ew.” Sin shivered at the imagery, “Not really. There’s a little bit of a destiny card. She has a bit of my soul in her. So we’re... Drawn together.”

Kim leaned back, “How did that happen? Come on, Sin. I need cheering up.”

“Her godmother made her by ripping my soul in half.” Sin whispered, and Kim went white as she realised that this love story was one that wouldn’t cheer her up, but take away what little faith in humanity that she had left.

Sin looked at Kim sadly, “It was Diana. That’s why I can’t do animancy. I was born for it, but she stole it. I can do necromancy, because of the crime. Because I am incomplete, I can touch all the forbidden magic.”

“Diana?” Kim breathed slowly, “Sin... Dan was created? Does she know?”

“Well, I tried to nick Diana’s diary again, to cross-reference some of the things I was doing to customise this body, and couldn’t.” Sin shrugged, “So... There is a chance. I really she doesn’t. She doesn’t deserve that hanging over her head. She is as real as you or I. More me, than you, sort of.”

Kim nodded, "So... You like Dan."

Sin went bright red, "That's what you got from that?"

Kim shrugged sheepishly, "So... What exactly did you do when the sun went black during the tourney? Dan looked freaked afterwards. And Morgana looked smug."

"Morgana can see in the dark." Sin said bitterly, "I... May have kissed Dan's cheek... And whispered in her ear..."

Kim glared, "Wait. You confessed? And Dan won't even tell you if she likes you or not? Ouch."

Sin shrugged, "Diana is a psycho who ripped a toddler's soul in half. She's banned Dan from having any relationships, and just about went off her rocker when she found that Dan was friends with me. Do you really want to find out what she would do to Dan if she admitted she liked me?"

Kim frowned suspiciously, "So... This power you're intent on gathering... What are you planning to do to Diana?"

"Dan's going to hate me." Sin sighed, looking down, "But for her sake... She has to be removed from the Animancy Coven."

Kim winced, "She will. But... You're right. Dan needs the freedom to be able to choose what is important to her. So she can finally transition and become a he. Or decide that was impulsive and go back. You need to walk on eggshells, Sin. Things have to be Dan's choice."

"I'm going to try." Sin sighed, "But... Diana... Makes me so angry. I always end up screwing things up. The only saving grace so far is that she's intimidated by me. Probably guilt."

Kim nodded, and patted her head, and then stood up, "Also, if you tell anyone I willingly kissed a troll, you will find toad hexes in your underwear for the next year."

Sin giggled, "You kissed a troll."

Episode Thirty Five: Chloe vs Zuzu

She waved a hand at her face, rolling over. The irritating something brushed her face again. She sat up, raising her claws and hissing. Directly into the face of the zombie babysitter. The woman grinned at her, as the spittle dripped off her face, "Ready to face the day?!"

Chloe groaned and pulled her blanket over her head, "Bats are nocturnal!"

The cloth was whipped away from her and tossed into the air, and the zombie leapt onto the bed beside her, bouncing her out of it, "Time to get up, bat girl!"

Chloe rubbed her head, sitting up. Again. "Too. Early. To piss me off!"

The zombie leaned forward, "Aw. Are you hungry? I guess I would be too. Where's your medicine?"

"I don't want it!" Chloe screamed, slapping the zombie across the room. She stood there seething with rage, "Give me blood. Now."

The zombie cracked her broken neck back into place and sat up, "I don't think Sin would like that very much."

Chloe twitched, fighting with the instinct, and the zombie pounced across the room, "Heal smash!"

The vial shattered as it hit her teeth, the liquid hitting the back of her throat as she spat out the glass. She shivered, tasting herself. It felt nice. Burning at the back of her throat. Slowly burning into her mana stream, transforming her at the...

Chloe winced, "Oh, crap."

The zombie blinked, "Huh? Oh, that. Don't worry about it."

Chloe glared, "Why? I'm struggling to be human, here."

"Being human is overrated." The zombie shrugged, dropping onto the bed, arms behind her head, "But, count to three."

"What?"

"Now."

Chloe screamed, falling forward and vomiting violently all over the carpet. Blood and black sludge that looked like it might once have been her entrails soaked into the ground. She gasped, holding her burned out throat, and looked over at the zombie, "The heck?"

"Medicine." The zombie smiled, "Diana made it for you, right? I don't like her. Sin hates her. Down to her core. Rare to have a hatred that deep. But, Sin also trusts her to take care of you, so I guess I have to."

"You... Are so weird." Chloe shivered, standing up weakly, and breathed in tiredly. "So, are you just planning on hanging out here all day, then?"

"Pretty much." The zombie replied, "I was made to entertain you, after all. Where you go, the world's liveliest corpse will follow!"

Chloe rolled her eyes, "You need a name."

"Zuzu." The zombie shrugged, "Apparently. Sin checked in on us. She shot me a message, with a name, and orders to keep you company!"

Chloe grinned, "She told you off, didn't she?"

The zombie looked down, her dead skin not flushing, but the embarrassment obvious. “Yes. She wasn’t happy with me.”

Chloe sighed, “So... Did Sin tell you what to do to occupy me? Or are you just making all of this up?”

“She taught me a spell!” Zuzu said, clapping her hands excitedly, “Something about summoning. Here we go!”

Before Chloe could interfere, the zombie snapped her fingers, and she heard the screams of the Underworld. That was weird. That undead could use magic wasn’t totally unheard of, though she’d never heard of a zombie that could. However, even the undead used casting.

A confused prince looked around, grabbing at his pants, which were around his ankles. “What? What?”

Zuzu bounded over to him, grabbing his cheeks, “Aw! He is so adorable! Can I keep him?”

Chloe flicked the zombie in the head, and stood in front of Sammeth, “This one is mine.”

Zuzu looked hurt, and then nodded, “Okay. Fine.”

Chloe turned back as Sammeth finished doing up his belt, “Sorry. Sin gave me a playmate. She’s a bit crazy, and very undead.”

“You like me!” Zuzu teased.

Sammeth nodded slowly, “Does she know she’s meant to be... Like... A slowly shuffling corpse?”

“Brains taste ick.” Zuzu said, ruining the last shred of the stereotype. “But I do like bacon.”

Sammeth sighed heavily, “Sin. Of course things aren’t going to be normal... So... Why did I get yanked off the toilet?”

Chloe sighed, “Asking the freak.”

“Chloe, just admit you like having me around.” Zuzu laughed, and then shrugged, “Sin taught me how to summon and banish you. Thought it’d be handy for cheering up Chloe. And she is in a really bad mood this morning.”

Sammeth nodded, “Right. Can I go back, now? I was on the toilet.”

Zuzu shook her head, “No. Use Chloe’s. You’re going to play here, today.”

His shoulders slumped and he moved off, as Chloe struggled not to feel embarrassed. And tried to remember when the last time the maids had cleaned it. They’d had to cut back on maids entering her room, what with the illness and all. She kept wanting to eat them.

Zuzu jumped up and down on the bed, entertaining herself. It really did seem like Sin had turned the dial up on that creature’s energy levels way too high. Overcompensating for a zombie’s usual lethargy, she guessed.

The zombie paused mid-jump, “Eh? Do you want to know more about me?”

“Just wondering why you’re such a hyper psycho.” Chloe shook her head, leaning against a wall, “But, you did say you were incomplete.”

“Sin has a few upgrades left for me, but I’m mostly here.” Zuzu smiled, “Mostly hyper because I don’t eat brains. That’s a crappy way to process energy. Sin hooked me up so that I feed directly of the leylines.”

That explained it. It also explained why Zuzu could do magic. She was a living magical conduit. “So... Is that why you can do magic with a snap of your fingers?”

“Oh, that.” Zuzu waved a hand, “Sin taught it to me. Some sort of secret hubbub she’s still working on. Sin is always looking into new magics, she’s cute like that. Did you hear she’s putting a play together? I can’t wait to watch it.”

“You could not sit still long enough.” Chloe blew up her hair, “So other than summoning Sammeth, what exactly was your plan?”

“To see if I could get him to finally kiss you.” Zuzu grinned.

Chloe went bright red, “What?”

The zombie shrugged, “Are all witches this modest? Seriously, boring. You’ve only got one life to live, girl.”

“If I give it to a guy, I lose my magic.” Chloe sighed, “Not to mention all the politics of our two cities and...”

“Bore. Ring.” Zuzu enunciated, “Besides, it isn’t like you have to lose all magic. Just the kind you have now. There’s a dozen other ways to have magic. Don’t you ever listen to Sin as she talks?”

Chloe frowned, “She’s never mentioned anything like that to me.”

Zuzu flipped over, doing a handstand, “Take a look at me! I’m dead. I can use magic, can’t I?”

“So can a lich.” Chloe retorted, “I don’t want to die.”

Zuzu bent over, breaking her spin to lift her head and shoulders up between her legs, “It just means there’s other ways to do stuff. Sin doesn’t show off unless she knows she can do it, that it’s finished. I mean, right now she’s kinda preoccupied with the bodyswap, and your curse, but she was working on a way that you can still be a witch. For you, and Sammeth.”

Chloe sighed, “So basically... You’re looking to watch cute moments between me and Sammeth? Good luck.”

Zuzu unravelled, standing up with a sickening crack, “I may also have messed with your Mana cards, if that’s your first thought.”

Chloe grabbed them from the desk, looking at the rather erotic images and descriptions now on them, and glared over at her, “Turn them back!”

Sammeth left the bathroom at that moment, “Oh sweet. We going to play a hand?”

Chloe spun to him, “No.”

He frowned, “Weird. But okay. What did you have in mind?”

The zombie jumped behind him, and whispered something in his ear, making him go bright red.

Chloe pointed an accusing finger, “What did she say!?”

Sammeth coughed nervously, “Nothing worth repeating. Not in a lady’s company.”

Zuzu grinned, moving a hand up and down, outside of Sammeth’s sight. Chloe blew her hair, again. Today was going to be a very long day.

Episode Thirty Six: Dan vs Sin

“Wake up.” A pillow hit her face, hard. Dan put her hands over her face, “Mercy, mercy!”

“Geeze. Just get up.”

She lowered her hands slowly, glaring up in the morning light, “Sin? What are you doing here?”

Sin grinned at her, “Tick tock.”

Dan breathed out heavily, and then stared in surprise, “Wait. You look like you! Did we swap back?”

“No.” Sin glared, “This is just temporary. It’ll fall apart in a decade or so. So hurry up, get up, and give me back my body already!”

Dan held up her hands, “Okay, sheesh.”

She slid out of bed and walked over to her wardrobe, selecting her clothes. She glanced over to Sin, “Do you mind?”

“Kind of.” Sin glared, “You always take forever to get dressed. Besides, it’s my body. I know every ingrown hair and freckle. You’re not going to embarrass me.”

Dan sighed, “You’re mean when you want to be.”

Sin grinned at her, “You’re only just learning that?”

The animancer slipped into her skirt, as fast as she could, and shook her head, “No. You’re volatile, Sin. Your unintentionally destructive magic is a reflection of who you are.”

She felt a breath on the back of her neck and swallowed nervously, and Sin whispered slowly, emphasizing each word, “If we don’t make any progress today... You’ll discover... Just how... Volatile... I really... Am.”

Dan felt a chill run down her back, “I take it you still hate me, then.”

“Mostly. But the bunny panties are cute.”

Dan went bright red, grabbing Sin by the front of her shirt and tossed her out into the hallway. That woman could get under her skin disturbingly easy, and being in her body was not making it any easier. Which Sin knew, of course. The others only guessed at what she felt. Even before the link, Sin could guess what she was thinking. Understand what she was saying when she insulted her.

Damned corpsehumper.

Sin banged on her door, “Call me that again, Dan!”

She swallowed nervously, “The heck? How did... Did you hear that through the link?”

“Nope.” Sin spoke through the door, “I just know you, witch.”

Dan sighed, finishing getting dressed, and reopened the door. She glared, “You went too far.”

Sin smiled, “Too far, did I? Who was it who stole what actually goes into my panties? And who was it who has actually looked to see how we’re different?”

Dan dropped her head in shame, “Fine. I get it. You’re violated.”

“Yeah, I’m going to be pissed for a few years yet.” Sin growled, “Now, have you worked out how to swap back?”

Dan looked up, “Actually, maybe. Though... Can I ask what you did with my body? If you’re wearing a temporary one?”

"I used immortalis on it and stashed it in a pocket dimension. Inside my lab, which also technically a pocket dimension. So nobody could find it by magic, if they tried." Sin shrugged, "A friend guards the lab, too."

Dan felt some tension go out of her shoulders, "That's good to hear."

"Though, you don't have to go back to it. You could try this one." Sin said, lifting her hands, "I look almost like me, but not quite. You might notice that some of my... Defects... Are missing. This body I made... Projects your self image."

Dan blinked, "That... Are you being nice to me?"

"Just because I hate you doesn't mean you're not my friend." Sin said, looking away, "Besides. I... I don't want to hide what I think about you, anymore."

"Please do." Dan begged, "If my godmother..."

"I will rip out Diana's throat with my bare hands!" Sin exploded, "I have every right to kill your mother. I've been nice, for your sake. But I won't let her look down on us. Our attraction... And I know it's mutual even if you won't admit it... Is the most natural thing. Seriously."

Dan frowned, "I know. That's... How I solved it. The body swap. I took a page out of your book, and stole my mother's book. I found detailed information about the exact make up of my soul, and how to bind it."

Sin went white, "Oh crap. I'm sorry. I am so... So, sorry."

Dan shook her head, "I'm out of tears, Sin. Now I'm just quietly angry. I still like my mother. She is still my mother. But... I guess it makes sense why I hate myself so much. And why I feel out of place, even in my own body."

"No, that's normal depression." Sin smiled, and put her arms around her shoulders, "Hot damn. I do look cute when I'm embarrassed, don't I? Your expression, on my face. That's cuter, I think."

Dan sighed, "And you just triggered the no-boyfriend alarm."

Sin grinned at her cheekily, "No way. That's amazing."

Dan looked over to the door tiredly, and it opened slowly, revealing her mother standing in the doorway. The woman looked at two versions of Sin, one holding the other and rolled her mouth. She breathed in and out three times, and then let out a soft and angry growl.

Sin giggled, "Looking for me, Diana?"

The woman took a step forward, "Hyacinth."

"My name, is Sin!" The necromancer shouted, the carpet beneath her frying as she turned, letting go of Dan. She clenched her fists, "I have been... So kind... To you... Diana. So very kind. My patience has worn thin."

Diana frowned, "Patience is it, little dead thing?"

Dan went to leap between them, but her feet wouldn't move. In fact, she couldn't move at all. She could feel the anger flowing through the link, and Sin's emotions taking control of her own body. Dan was now nothing more than a passenger. Sin was in control of both bodies. And she wasn't blacking out from the strain.

"You beat me. You insulted me. You tried to take what is rightfully mine." Sin glared, "No more. I'm taking her."

Dan felt her confusion skyrocket. What the heck was Sin talking about?

Diana raised an eyebrow, "You're taking my daughter, are you? I don't think you have that right, corpsehumper."

"Gather, gather, rise and remember." Sin chanted quietly, glaring at her mother, "By the Charter, by the holy soil of the shining city, I call you forth to fulfil the contract. Knights of the Table, acknowledge -"

Diana held up her hands, "Stop!"

"Your king." Sin finished, biting off the words with a glare.

Dan felt herself thrust into the ground, onto her knees. She looked up in shock, back in control, and saw a knight standing over her, in brilliant and shining green armour. The green knight. The knight from legend.

She turned, and saw a black knight, and a white knight, standing over her mother.

Sin was surrounded by knights. In fact, they were filling Dan's bedroom, and she had a feeling that there were more, but that they hadn't fully materialised because of the small space.

One of the knights was placing a small golden circlet, with a green stone in the centre, atop Sin's head. What the heck? Sin had asked to be acknowledged as a king, but this seemed different. These spirits seemed living, not dead. This didn't smell like necromancy. In fact... It felt like... Animancy?

"Sin?"

The knights who weren't holding people down saluted, a fist to their chests, "Long live the king!"

Sin glared at her mother, "Never forget. This is your fault. I hold grudges, Diana."

"Sin."

The girl glanced down at her, and smiled, "Sorry, Dan. You belong to me now. I guess that was a tad... Impulsive."

Dan shrugged the knights off, standing up, "What do you mean... I... Belong to you!?"

The knight thrust her back onto her knees, and Sin frowned, crouching, "Yeah... So... You know how your stupid mum made you by trying to force the reincarnation of Artur?"

Dan glared at her, "You always say you don't believe he ever existed."

Sin grinned sheepishly.

"What the heck, Sin?" Dan sighed, "And can you call off your dogs?"

Sin nodded, "You can let go of her. She is mine, after all."

Dan stood up and looked around, "So... Are you always going to be surrounded by knights, now? And do you think I'll ever forgive you for this?"

"Whilst I'm away from Caerlorne, and... Maybe? Probably hold your grudge until you hear me say the next bit." Sin smiled.

Dan tapped her foot, "I'm waiting."

"Respect." A knight said, placing a hand on her shoulder, "You address the King of the Shining City."

Dan scratched her head, "Did you just put King Gwaine out of a job?"

Sin laughed, "He's wearing green, Dan."

She turned to the green knight who had just reprimanded her and noticed a silver circlet embedded into his helmet, also with a green stone and her jaw dropped. “You actually summoned living knights, too!?”

“The Rite of Royalty.” Diana said quietly, “Sin used the rite we tried to modify when we created you, daughter.”

“She’s not yours.” Sin glared angrily, and then sighed, “But she shouldn’t be mine either. You’re free to do as you please, Dan. Your coven has no say in what you choose to do. Your mother cannot attempt to control you, on pain of death. You can have any empty property or land in Caerlorne that you ask for, within reason. I can also set you up with a house in the Dead Forest.”

Dan sighed, “You’re being nice, but sort of forgetting I wanted to be an animancer. The head of my coven.”

“And you are.” Sin replied, smiling, “Your own coven. I know it isn’t exactly what you wanted, but I won’t let you be hurt here. I’ve seen enough. I mean, a freaking boyfriend alarm? That’s cruel and unusual.”

Diana glared, “What would you know corpsehumper!?”

A sword was put to the woman’s throat, and the knight looked to Sin for approval. She shook her head, and crouched in front of Diana, “You’re kinda slow on the uptake, aren’t you? The crown on my head isn’t just part of the ritual. You are talking to the King of Caerlorne. Really.”

Diana rolled her eyes, “And? You’re in Wizeria.”

“Yes, and the queen is a friend. Which means, I’ve got that fun privilege. You know... Immunity from small crimes, for the sake of the two cities not going to war.” Sin grinned, “Dan might not forgive me if I kill you, but I am not above banishing you to a dark oblivion.”

Dan grabbed Sin’s elbow, “Fine! Let’s go somewhere else, already!”

Sin turned to her with a grin, “Creepius summonae!”

Episode Thirty Seven: Sin vs Boredom II

Sin grinned at her assembled friends, cajoled gently into attending with death threats, and raised her arms, “Welcome, the Damned Players, ladies and gentlemen!”

Kim leaned on her hands, “There are no boys here. It’s just us.”

Sin twitched, and clenched a fist, “Gather, gather, rise and remember.”

Dan’s hands through up, “Hey! We don’t need the wrath of the Round Table right this instant! Kim, apologise.”

The tekmaner glanced at her, “Seriously? Are a bunch of knights really that scary?”

“Shut up!” Sin screamed, putting her hands on her hips and glaring, “You said you wouldn’t make fun of me.”

Kim blew her hair, “Sorry. Fine. Whatever.”

Chloe smacked her over the back of the head, “Grow up, Kim. Sin put effort into this. We should be nice.”

Sin grinned slowly, “Oh, are you mad about me revealing that -”

Kim went white, “I’ll behave. I’ll be a perfect little princess.”

Sin scratched her head as if she were confused, and then shrugged it off. “The Damned Players rise upon this day of blackened sun to -”

“You’re the one who blacked out the sun.” Chloe interrupted, “So I could turn up. I don’t think that makes it worth mentioning.”

Sin stamped her foot, “Next one who talks is getting banished to a dark oblivion!”

Her friends exchanged looks, and Dan raised her wand. Sin grinned and snapped her fingers, “Temporalis borealis.”

She held up her fist-full of wands, “Behave. Okay. For five minutes, can you idiots just... Behave?”

Chloe glared, “How did she do that? Raw spells don’t sound like normal ones. And she didn’t use a wand.”

Dan shrugged, “We can’t scan for another channel like a crystal, now.”

Chloe elbowed the creature next to her, “Zuzu? How did she do it?”

Sin glared furiously, and the zombie twitched, obviously wanting to say everything that she had just noticed, “Sin asked us to be quiet.”

“Oblivia.” Sin warned, and then her shoulders collapsed, “Oh, whatever. Roll curtain.”

She walked to the side of the poorly made stage and sat on an empty wine barrel, dropping her head into her hands. It wasn’t like the Players were actually any good. They were just a bunch of dead things that she’d conjured up. They tried, but they couldn’t remember being human. They weren’t going to be able to portray emotions convincingly.

Snowball climbed into her lap, curling into a ball. The cat almost immediately began to purr contentedly. Sin grinned. That wasn’t going to last. The first zombie was stepping onto the stage. He bowed, almost losing his head.

“This is a tale, dear friends, from sombre times. A time when magic was feared, when those born with it were called cursed. A time when even mothers would kill their beloved children, to spare them the pain

of being called... Sorceress.”

A spotlight appeared on the other side of the stage, revealing a zombie that might almost resemble a female. She was holding a small wrapped bundle and making a coughing noise. It was supposed to be tears, but a zombie can't cry.

“Oh child of mine, I must take from you this life, but I cannot. What crime against the stars have I committed that such a choice is mine, and mine alone? It cannot be, this curse, am I to blame?”

Sin blew her hair, pouting. The Players really over-acted. But at least they were remembering their lines, so far. That was about the only good thing she could say about their dead delivery.

Three hideous creatures summoned up from the darkness of the stage. They were supposed to be witches, but dressing a skeleton was next to impossible. They sort of looked more like ghouls than anything else. The others might take just a tiny bit of offense.

“Give me the child, and I promise I shall make them great and terrible. All will fear their wrath.” One said, stepping forward confidently.

The one beside them stepped forward, nearly falling on their falling skirt, “No! Give me the child, and I promise I shall bestow great kindness upon you and every descendant. Your line will never falter.”

The last didn't move, instead just shaking it's head quietly, “No. Give me the child, and I promise to teach them how to have a gentle heart.”

The woman-ish thing looked up, and spoke with a cackling voice that might have been meant to convey fear, “Such a choice is impossible. I will only give you my child, if all three of you will raise them.”

The light shifted as the four froze in place, revealing the narrator, he spoke strongly, “The cunning of this mother was admirable, and true. Yet she could not know the course of human history that she had set.”

He was her real success.

He couldn't speak strongly, enunciating each word like a proclamation. Of course, he couldn't actually speak in any other tone of voice, making him sort of a terrible one-role actor. Better than the rest, anyhow.

The zombies began shuffling offstage, and to hide the change of scenery, the narrator crossed to the centre. He spread his hands, “Far away, in the wilds and wastes, the young child grew under the tutelage of her three new mothers. She never knew the one who gave birth to her, or gifted her with power untold.”

There was a crash, and Sin twitched as she saw Morgana standing in the middle of the broken stage. The witch in black turned to face her, wand pointing out towards her, “I will not let you tell this story!”

Sin didn't say anything. She could feel herself about to snap. Snowball yowled and ran from her lap, heading far away back home. Probably to hide underneath her bed. The cat knew how to sense the oncoming storm, and right now, that is exactly what Sin was.

Dan coughed, “Morgana... You might not want to do that right now.”

The witch glared, “You won't be telling my story, Sin.”

“Wasn't, yet.” Sin glared, twitching, “This was the birth of Artur, you psycho. I made him into an orphan.”

Morgana frowned, “But... The narrator said 'she'.”

“Yes.” Sin blew up her hair, “In her first life. Not her next. I wrote a freaking tragedy you elemental freak! So, sit down, shut up, and I won't turn you inside out.”

Morgana looked at her coldly, “Even the king cannot speak to me like that, Sin.”

Sin stood up and stamped her foot, "Enough! All of you piss off! I'm going home."

The witch snapped her fingers again, banishing the actors back to the Underworld, and stormed passed her friends. She could feel the tears about to break loose, but she could hold it. She would. Until she was home.

She'd left their wands behind, but that wouldn't help any of them catch up with her. They were in the Dead Forest, her home. It could feel how upset she was, and was moving around her, closing off the pathway. Rewriting itself to trap them far from her.

She burst into the house, and saw Prune look up from the couch. Her godmother sighed, "They didn't like it, then?"

Sin leaned against the door, biting her lip, and shook her head. She had worked so hard on the play, especially considering everything else that was going wrong in her world. Yet none of them could just shut the heck up and watch.

Prune smiled, "There's an apple pie and an icecream on your bed."

Sin frowned, suspiciously, "Is there dead people in it? Or might have been people?"

Prune sighed, "No. Lydia wouldn't even let me put a rabbit's foot in for good luck."

Sin smiled, "Thank you, godmother."

Then she ran up to her room, so she could eat, cry, and hate the world.

Episode Thirty Eight: Kim vs Solomon IV

She leaned back on the picnic rug. It seemed that the forest was so irritated with them all that it wasn't letting them out. Which shouldn't be all that surprising, considering Sin had run off to cry and they were in a freaky part of town.

Maybe she shouldn't have started things off.

She just didn't understand why Sin was taking it so seriously, it was just a play. A really boring play about an ancient story that didn't even have any relevance to today. No real romance, just drama and boys waving swords. She got enough of that being around the workmen.

Dan approached the pile of wands cautiously, and picked hers up. She winced, waiting and then sighed and tossed them to the witches. "I guess she didn't curse them, then."

The zombie flipped overhead, landing on the ruined stage, "You would have all deserved it! Sin worked really, really hard on this!"

Morgana waved her wand, "Silencia. Kim, is it true you encountered a troll, recently?"

Kim sighed heavily, "Eugh. Don't remind me."

"Did you happen to catch a name?" Morgana sighed, "I've been trying to track one that attempted to kill Gwaine down."

Kim sighed, "Solomon. He'd just make one up, though, right?"

"Trolls aren't that intelligent." Morgana said dismissively, "They can't come up with a half decent lie."

Kim looked at her in confusion, "That's... Not true. At least for this one."

Morgana rolled her eyes, "Sure you recognised the species?"

Arrogant twat. Kim knew a troll when she saw one. She wasn't some tiny little witchling. She would be the one to become the next head of the Tekmancy Coven. That had already been voted on and decided.

That being said, she was right that few trolls were intelligent. They tended to be obsessive, extremely violent, and prone to outbursts of rage.

He hadn't been.

Kim stood up, pulling the top button off her dress, "Sorry guys, it is kinda cheating, but it only takes one."

She tossed the disc onto the ground. It expanded as it flipped, becoming a circlet of grey panels large enough to step onto. The moment she did, her body and soul were reduced to a matrix, compressed, and sent through the leyline as a data-burst.

She made a face as she emerged in a cloud of vapour, dripping wet. "Gross."

She paused, looking around at the sleeping workers and smiled. "I didn't mean you, Solomon. If you're willing to come out, I'm willing to talk, now."

She saw the troll emerge from a shadow, averting his oversized eyes. She glanced down, seeing her underwear through her soaked dress. She gasped and flipped backwards into the nearest golem. "You didn't see that!"

The troll held his hands up, "Fine! Just don't kill me."

Kim cocked her head, and then realised she'd chosen a military golem to hide in. Probably not the best choice for talking to someone she had threatened to kill. Well, planned to kill.

"I won't." Kim spoke through the interface, "I was wrong. You were, too. Embedding a hex in my head. Which I am still mad about. But... I guess I can understand it. You're not like most trolls."

"I am, actually." He retorted, "You folk only get to meet the runaways. The exiled. Most of them deserve what a witch would bring. Our society doesn't have an execution sentence, like yours. We send them away. If they can survive ten years on the surface, they can come back."

Kim winced, "Oh. Not many do."

"I... Haven't been lying to you."

Kim frowned, "Was Caerlorne a misunderstanding, then?"

The troll gulped, causing half his hideous body to move, "Sort of. But I did deserve being hunted."

Kim giggled, "You tried to kiss the king in his sleep."

Solomon scratched the back of his head, "... Yeah."

"Slut." Kim teased.

Solomon sat down, "I guess you're not coming out of there?"

"I'm not exactly back to wanting you to see me naked." Kim stated, "I'm sorry to sound speciest, but I prefer your other face."

Solomon croaked in surprise, and then laughed, "Interspecies romance doesn't work. I'll get over it."

Kim frowned, "Is that the whole male troll lays eggs inside the stomach of a girl thing?"

Solomon sighed, "Witches. Of course you've heard about that. It's a kind of psycho thing to do. Basically rape. And murder. There's a reason those freaks are exiled to the surface world."

"Sorry." Kim said, trying to clear the image from her mind. "If it's a consolation, you do actually kiss well."

"Kissed a few boys, then?"

She went bright red, "No... That's not... Ah! Why do you have to be such a... A..."

"Troll?" Solomon laughed. "I take it I can leave the city without your security system taking me out?"

"No." Kim glared, "You're staying right here. Until I can sort my head out. I'm not going to let myself regret either killing you, or letting you go."

"I don't have any minkpowder left." Solomon said, "I can't glamour myself again. These people might have a problem with me."

Kim wheeled the golem forward a little, "Stand next to me. Now."

As he approached she flicked a couple switches and the floor spun, and began to lower itself slowly. Kim yawned, leaning back and putting her feet up on the console, "So, this is one of my private labs. Mostly boring junk, but you'll be able to hang out here without fear of someone else killing you."

The troll looked up at her, "So I stay put whilst you decide whether or not I'm worth letting live?"

"Not like we'll be bored." Kim sighed, "Witch's work is never done. I'll sort out some way for you to send messages to your lab. If you have one."

"I wasn't lying."

Kim suddenly leaned forward, "Does Penny know what you are?"

"... Yes?"

She felt an overwhelming sense of jealousy at that thought. She didn't want to admit why. Which made her realise that despite his truly hideous appearance, and his smell, she might still have feelings for him. His betrayal of her trust wasn't enough to make them go away, or turn to hate.

That was irritating.

Episode Thirty Nine: Chloe vs Pudding

She banished Morgana, at least for the day. The witch had been insensitive to the situation, and everyone involved. She hadn't even been invited to the play, and still managed to get everyone stuck in the forest. The worst she had done was to silence the zombie.

Zuzu had been making sense.

Sin had every right to be annoyed at the lot of them. Which was why Chloe was perched atop the frame above her bed, looking through a recipe book. As her godmother had always said, the way to a woman's heart was through her stomach. Or words to that effect.

Zuzu was hanging from the frame, dangling by her knees. The zombie blew a raspberry, "I'm bored. Can't you choose something, already?"

"I don't know what Sin likes." Chloe retorted, "And all I can think about are the red things. Pretty sure she won't like the reminder that I'm sick. I don't want her to think about me at all. I want her to be excited for a treat."

"Good luck." Zuzu laughed, "Sin thinks about you a lot. Not as much as Dan, and she is pretty distracted by that witch at the moment, but she likes you. You're her friend."

Chloe looked down at the zombie, "Are you just assuming or...?"

"I exist because Sin does." Zuzu shrugged, "I'm like... A fantasy or dream or some crap. I don't really understand it. But it means I get flashes of her. Pieces, drifting like snowflakes. Weird, huh?"

Chloe rubbed her eyes, "Remind me not to ask a zombie to explain how they exist ever again. Do you have a favourite food, Zuzu? Looking for inspiration here. So far, I want ohagi."

"Mana-rich food." Zuzu shrugged, and then flipped around the beam a couple times, before stopping at the top, "Something with syrup?"

Chloe drooled involuntarily at the thought of a rich and sticky liquid. She grabbed her handkerchief and wiped her mouth, glaring at the zombie and daring her to say something. Zuzu didn't even seem to have noticed, but then again, drooling might be something that she did when she saw food.

Chloe flicked through the recipe book and paused, "Pudding. Treacle pudding. It's a bit of a rich-person food, but it isn't overly difficult to make. And I don't think Sin will think it's too snotty."

The zombie dragged herself over, "You really like Sin, don't you?"

"She's my closest friend." Chloe sighed, "Or she was, until she started spending her every waking moment on a cure. I know there isn't one. I just... Wish..."

Zuzu crossed her legs behind her head, "You want to spend some of your last days with her?"

"Yeah." Chloe fought back tears, glaring at the happy image of the pudding, cursing that a vampire had managed to find its way inside the castle.

"Isn't Hera looking for the cure?" Zuzu asked, "I'm pretty sure Sin is just feeling helpless. That's why she made me. To cheer you up."

Chloe smiled, "That you do. Innocent, psycho, and completely inhuman. You're a bag of laughs."

Zuzu turned her head upside down, "I like you too, Chloe."

She shoved the zombie backwards, crept out. Then she sighed, looking at the recipe, "I could make this, I think. But probably not without going freakish about the treacle. I can't get the chef to make it for her. Then it wouldn't be my efforts."

Zuzu sighed, "Isn't the medicine working at all?"

"I should have fully transformed a long time ago." Chloe smiled, "That I can still eat human food is a bloody miracle. I'll take what I can get. Though I am kind of surprised that Diana hasn't killed me."

Zuzu paused, "Did... Did you hear what Sin did?"

"She became King of Caerlorne." Chloe facepalmed, "Of course I heard. She's now in charge of one of my most dangerous neighbours. Though, I think she left Gwaine as Regent, so not a lot has changed."

Zuzu frowned, "But some things have?"

"I can't punish her for anything without causing a massive diplomatic incident." Chloe stated, "Which makes me kind of glad that she's been sticking to the Dead Forest lately."

"She hasn't." Zuzu shook her head, "Last few nights, Sin's been sneaking into the lower levels. Visiting families. Not sure why."

Chloe smiled, "That's just what she does. She's their witch. The sneaking is probably just her avoiding Dan, after getting her kicked out of the Animancy Coven."

Zuzu frowned with disappointment, "Is that how you see it?"

"The Coven should be disbanded." Chloe stated, "Sin did Dan a favour, even if she didn't want it. We're getting distracted. I just want to make Sin something nice. Are you going to help or bounce off the walls?"

"Second one sounds fun." Zuzu grinned, "But I don't really bounce so much as splat."

"Please don't."

The zombie grinned at her, holding up a peace sign, "Okay!"

Chloe sighed and went back to flipping through the recipe book. She heard a crash, and felt the sunlight burn her hand. The queen leaped backwards, landing between the wall and the roof, hissing.

Zuzu groaned, sitting up as another arrow hit her in the chest. The zombie cursed, and dropped to the ground, looking at the projectiles that would have killed Chloe if they hit her. "This is totally going to ruin my weight. Assholes."

Chloe fell off the wall in surprise at how calm and girly the zombie was being about the whole situation. Someone had just tried to murder her, and she was worried about the weight of a couple arrows sticking out of her? And not the long term damage?

Zuzu's head snapped upright, catching the next arrow. She glared towards the window, and Chloe swallowed nervously. There was now a shaft of sunlight between her and the door.

"Your Highness, be a good girl and climb under the bed, would you?" Zuzu said with a slow and angry tone that Chloe had never heard from the creature before.

She didn't hesitate.

She heard the window shatter, and flinched as the edge of sunlight appeared, nearly hitting her. She also heard the guttural roar of anger that was more familiar for a zombie. Considering the magic that she'd seen Zuzu pull off every now and then, she pitied whoever had decided to attack them.

It would be interesting to know who tried to assassinate her, but she didn't always find that out. Being attacked out of the blue like this was not that unusual. It was just worrying to think somebody might have discovered her illness. She really didn't want a witch burning. Even if it was because she was a vampire, it might not end there.

Zuzu closed the curtains, and then her excited face appeared below the bed, “All done! They weren’t even a fight. So, have you thought of something yummy?”

Chloe rolled her eyes, and climbed out slowly, cautiously. The sunlight was mostly sealed away. It couldn’t kill her, yet. It just hurt. Made her skin peel almost instantly. She was still managing to fight off the illness.

Zuzu gurgled, and Chloe turned, staring in fear.

The vampire cocked his head, “Amazing. I can hardly believe it. You really are resisting the infection.”

Chloe shook her head, feeling the dizziness. “Stop trying to hypnotise me!”

The creature who had turned her took a hesitant step backwards, and then smiled, his arm slightly relaxing around the zombie’s throat. “Amazing. I could not have imagined this, my queen. Your voice is strong. It shouldn’t be. You’re not even a new vampire, yet. The older we become, the stronger. That is the way of nature.”

Chloe smiled at him, and then she cast the spell.

“Ereclu siugnas!”

The vampire screamed, falling backwards and to the floor. Zuzu turned and looked down at him, “Aw. Do you think he thought trying to kill me was a threat? I can just sew my head back on.”

Chloe coughed, leaning against a bed post as she felt the blood running down and out of her mouth. Raw spells had a cost to them, and this one more than most. She’d just burned away a day of her life to cast it. Erased a part of her soul. All the same, she’d just weakened the vampire, as she’d planned.

Vampires always tried to come back, to collect the ones they turned. To assemble an army of loyal servants. Older vampires can command the younger. The older you were, the more powerful the hypnotism.

Chloe, however, had an ace up her sleeve on that front. She was born of royal blood. The power to command was hers by birthright. The vampire in her could reflect that authority that she had. The power to command ran through her veins, allowing her to counter him. She couldn’t overcome him, he was still her sire. She couldn’t kill him either, or she would die as well.

She only had the power to do one thing.

“Conligo minusmeam!” She screamed, flicking her wand. It was a new spell. Something she hadn’t had the time to refine, or even to learn to fully control. However, she had to take the opportunity whilst she could.

To bind something that no longer had a soul.

Episode Forty: Dan vs Sin II

She floated, sitting cross-legged on a cloud, glaring at the small house in the dirty slums. She had been following Sin because she was angry at the woman. She'd come to the play, because she was angry at the woman.

Everything she did now, was because she was angry at that damn woman.

Dan's entire life had been devoted to her coven. She had been raised to lead it. She had studied her ancestors, trained beneath her mother and aunts. She had learned the forbidden spells, the forgotten spells, and created her own. All in the pursuit of understanding animancy, and leading her coven to a new future in it.

That future had been ripped away from her.

She didn't care about Sin's intentions. It was a stupid, selfish move. She would hold a grudge, and she would find a way to make the hedgewitch pay for what she had done. She knew that Sin could feel her hatred through their link. She didn't care. She wanted Sin to know that she was hunting her. Looking for an opportunity.

"Boo."

Dan twitched, turning, "You fooled the link?"

Sin grinned at her cheekily, "No. You're were brooding. So you didn't notice me move. You're cute when you're mad."

Dan sighed heavily, "Why are you here, anyway? Aren't you avoiding everyone?"

"They're sick." Sin said grimly, "A disease. Spreading fairly quickly, if I'm honest. The victims don't know much. I haven't been able to track down the source, yet."

Dan swallowed, "Wait. I thought you were helping them. You're interrogating their dead? Do you have any heart, Sin?"

The witch slapped her.

Dan glared at her, "I will kill you, one day. Sin."

"Mutual." Sin smiled tightly, "But maybe I might bring you back. You can't promise the same. I was helping them. I'm a witch, not a bastard."

Dan sighed, "Really? How? You suck. Sorry, but if it isn't death, you can't do it."

"Viruses are neither living nor dead." Sin replied, "Which means, I can command them. You can't."

Dan went white, "You... Can bind... A virus?"

"Not completely." Sin shrugged, "But I can stop the replication. Allow the living victims to fight it off. But I can't stop the spread until I find how it is spreading. There's too many people. Farmers and streetgirls. People who don't have contact. Architects and beggars."

Dan sighed heavily, "I don't really care. I'm here because you're a piece of crap."

Sin kissed her cheek, smiling, "You know, you have been much crueler to me over the years. At least I was trying to help."

Dan shrugged her off, "Give up, Sin. We're practically sisters. I have your soul in me, remember?"

"You're my other half." Sin smiled sadly, "Literally. I don't think sister is the right term to describe us. The attraction isn't ever going away. And you know it. Why do you always have to push me away?"

Dan clenched her fists, "I hate you."

"You know... You could just talk to your mother." Sin said slowly, "You have the choice to do whatever. It's been two days. Have you even tried?"

Dan swallowed, "That's none of your business."

"So." Sin leaned in, looking her in the eye, "Do you like pets?"

Dan stared at her, "The... Heck?"

Sin grinned, putting an arm around her, idly kicking her legs off the side of the cloud, "I found a puppy. But my godmothers won't let me keep it. I've been hiding it out in the forest, but I feel sad for him. I was wondering if..."

"I have a tiny one room apartment." Dan growled, "I'm lucky I was able to get that much."

Sin blew out her cheeks, "I told you I could get you a proper place."

"I take care of myself." Dan sneered.

"It was my fault." Sin said, "You should have let me make up for it."

Dan sighed heavily, "I'm not forgiving you. Give up already."

Sin squeezed her shoulders, "So... That's a no for helping with the puppy. Do you want to meet him, anyway? He's so cute."

Dan blew her hair in frustration, "No."

"So... You want to continue to stalk me and plot some kind of half-thought-through revenge?"

Dan glared at her, "... And?"

"You're half-assed magic is as bad as my animancy." Sin giggled, "You might want to try and put some effort into your revenge, if that's really what you actually want."

Dan shrugged her arm off her, "Shut up."

Sin kissed her cheek again and stood up, smiling down, "I have an idea for you. Considering you're feeling so lost."

Dan glared at her.

"Find yourself, Dan." Sin smiled sweetly, "You've finally got time to try and understand you, without guilt or anything else."

"I still have to pay the rent."

Sin sighed and reached into a pocket, feeling around, "Oh come on, don't tell me the pile fell over... Oh, here."

She pulled out a stuffed purse and dropped it in Dan's lap with a not-painless thump. The witch looked at it, and then back up her, "Why does everyone think you're poor, Sin?"

"Oh, this?" Sin shrugged, "Rainy day fund. Or something. I don't use the money I get from monsters. Too painful to get rid of the curses and so on. You know, mimic treasure chests and so on."

Dan rolled her eyes, "Were you going to mention that it's cursed?"

"Well, curses break down in the oblivion realms, so it probably isn't." Sin smiled, "I just forget it's there. Plus, it feels better to use gold I actually earned."

Dan rolled her eyes. Drops from monsters was earned. Sin was just weird. As usual. And so very hard to remain angry at. Which was ridiculous. She had forced Dan into a new life, with no understanding of half of the consequences. She'd stolen her purpose in life.

Sin sighed heavily, "Well, if you don't want to take the time, I do have a request of the new godmother of the new coven."

Dan looked up at her, "What?"

"I told you. I was giving you your own coven. That makes you godmother."

Dan glared, "How does one witch equal a coven?"

"That's part of the request." Sin said slowly, "One of the... Victims... Had a young daughter. She's... Got potential. I was wondering if you could look at her."

Dan frowned, "Selection isn't that easy, Sin. You and I might have cheated it, but do you remember how hard the other's had to work?"

"She walks into a room and all the flowers bloom. From seed."

Dan went white, "That's... Not good. She's bleeding magic. She's not in control."

"She needs a godmother." Sin stated, "I.. I'm just asking that you take a look at her. You know the binding spell to take her magic if things are that bad. Or you can ask Chloe to deal with it, as queen. Let her make the choice. But... She could use a gentle hand. She's just lost her mother, and she has no other family. Diana can't provide what she needs."

Dan sighed heavily, "How many more backup plans do you have?"

"I was going to take her to Caerlorne, tomorrow." Sin shrugged, "I figured you needed space. But you don't agree. So... Does Chloe make a choice? Do I take her to Caerlorne to our coven? Or do you want to talk to her first?"

Dan clenched her fists, "I hate you, Sin."

The hedgewitch pulled a stained scrap of paper from her dress and handed it to her, "You'll find her there. She hasn't been outside much since her mother passed. Let me know if you can't find her."

The witch then showed why Dan hadn't noticed her last transport. There were no screaming hands or even a spell. She just dissolved like black smoke. Dan rolled her jaw. She had an idea how Sin was doing some of this. The finger-snapping and saying a spell made sense. The girl had found a channel other than a wand that she liked.

Being able to do things without saying the spell was something else.

It was disturbing.

Episode Forty One: Sin vs Regent

He didn't look like much of a knight without his armour and weapons. The suit just made him look like more of a politician than anything else. Which, he was. It's just that he had spent most of his youth fighting monsters, earning his position as king with the defeat of the great dragon.

Sin frowned sheepishly, "So... This is awkward, I guess."

Gwaine smiled, "I never wanted to be king, your highness. I was really, really hoping that you were going to take all of this off my hands. But I guess you're less interested in ruling a city than I am."

Sin relaxed a little, and frowned, looking around the great hall, and skipped over to a window, "Caerlorne is pretty from here, isn't it?"

"It is." Gwaine said politely, waiting for her to get back on track to why he had called here here. Which Sin had exactly no intention of doing. Whatever he wanted was work, and she did not want to be doing any kind of work. She was going to treat this is a vacation.

Sin put a foot up on the window, and the knight sighed, "This is important, your highness. Plus, Caerlorne guards tend to shoot down things that fly overhead."

Sin turned around, pouting.

The regent smiled at her, "The people have heard about your return. They want to meet you. I've been putting it off... But there was a dragon sighting yesterday."

Sin turned her head completely sideways, "Dragon? There's one still alive?"

Gwaine shrugged, "I have no idea. Everyone always thinks it's a dragon. It wouldn't surprise me if it was de Amore, doing research on the city. She does seem determined to find a weakness. She even interrogated me at wand-point a couple days ago."

Sin dropped to the ground, crossing her legs and pouting. "She is mad."

The regent grinned knowingly, "Am I detecting some -"

"She's adorable." Sin glared at him, "I like her. There is nothing more to add to it than that. You can hold your judgements."

Gwaine shook his head, "Girl, I married a fairy. If you recall. I'm not exactly one to judge."

Sin looked down in shame, remembering how that story ended. It wasn't peaceful, and it wasn't kind. "Sorry."

Gwaine sighed, "So. Public address. Shall we get you a speech writer? At least to give you some advice?"

"I don't want to." Sin pouted.

"Yuri has pretty good advice. And for a speech writer, he's fairly good at just directing you to go your own way. Hands off approach."

The witch glared at him, one eye twitching, and the regent smiled straight back at her, completely unaffected. Sin blew out her cheeks, "You're used to worse than me, aren't you?"

"I'm the regent of the city. The whole city. The city that gets attacked by monsters and has almost-weekly attempts by magic folk to steal the throne. Next to them, you're a cupcake."

"Cupcakes!" Sin shouted, launching to her feet, "I demand cupcakes! I won't listen until you get me some."

Gwaine sighed and walked over, pulling a cord. A bell rang overhead, and a man in a suit emerged from behind a curtain, "Yes, m'lord?"

The regent turned, "Her highness desires cupcakes."

The man looked to her, his face completely lacking emotion, "Is there a particular kind her highness would like?"

Sin bit her cheek, thinking, "I would like... A lot."

The man's veneer of serenity nearly broke, and he bowed, "As her majesty wishes."

Sin glared at him, "No. No I did not mean three, you meanie. I meant a lot."

The cracks appeared, and the man made a strained smile, "As you wish, my queen."

"King." Sin retorted, "And no, I did not mean bloody four. Are you thick? Do I need to go talk to the chef myself?"

Gwaine burst out laughing, and the butler broke. "Are you serious, my lord? This is our new ruler?"

Sin reappeared behind the both of them, the shadows coalescing into her form, and she whispered in the man's ear, "I hold grudges."

He turned to her, wide eyed in terror, and Sin grinned, "Also... Just so you know... I'm a necromancer. Death isn't an escape."

Gwaine facepalmed, "That wasn't... Very diplomatic."

Sin shrugged, "And? I didn't get the throne by being diplomatic, did I? Everyone is an enemy of Caerlorne, anyway. But I promise you, having a witch as queen is going to have an effect. Even if everyone thought Morgana was scary."

Gwaine frowned, "Speaking of which, she's investigating the dragon rumour."

Sin held up a hand, "I told you. Cupcakes first. Now. Lots. Go."

The butler bowed out of the room, and Sin's shoulders drooped. Gwaine noticed and put a hand on her shoulder, "So that was partially an act, then?"

"He was thinking that I couldn't protect him or the city." Sin sighed, "Threats aren't going to help longterm, but in the short they do. Besides. What idiot thinks four cupcakes is lots?"

"Most people only get to eat one cupcake in a year."

Sin glanced over, "Food shortages? Here?"

"Monster razing our farms all the time. Magical disease... It all takes a toll." Gwaine shrugged.

Sin nodded, and tapped her foot, "Bel? I could use your help with something."

There was a blast of purple fire, and a man in a suit appeared. He adjusted his red tie, and straightened his golden cufflinks. "Apologies for the delay, Sin. How can I help my favoured master on this day?"

Sin frowned, "There's a bit of a food shortage. Apparently things keep attacking our fields. What do you think? Skeleton patrols are probably out of the question, they'd freak too many people out."

"Hellhounds and familiars." The man said politely, "In teams. One familiar to two hellhounds, to guide and control them. The people will be reassured by the familiar, that they know belongs to a witch. And hellhounds can almost look like mutts. Humans are good at ignoring things that they fear."

Gwaine stepped forward, hands trembling, though he was trying not to show it. "Are... Are you... Belphegor? Prince of the Underworld?"

The man bowed his head, "Indeed, Green Knight, I am. I do remember you, and assure you I still bear the scar you struck me. Most impressive. I understand that you are to be regent for my mistress?"

Gwaine frowned, "If you are going to try -"

The demon held up a hand, "Please, stop, sir. Before you insult me. I serve my mistress above all else. There are a few witches who have been granted the power to call upon me, but Sin is my favoured mistress. I will never lead her down the path of temptation, not to danger. It would not do for me to lose her."

Sin grinned, "Thanks, Bel. Do you think you could ask a few people?"

"I will have the hounds ready in a few hours. Say... Twenty patrols? I would not approach the witches, however. They would not appreciate such a summons coming from me."

Sin nodded, "Sure. That makes sense."

The demon bowed his head, and vanished in purple flames again. Sin sighed, "Does Caerlorne have twenty witches?"

"A great many more." Gwaine laughed, "Morgana founded a school here. All students learn of all the magic streams. Most choose to go into a particular coven at the end, but we do have some multi-talented witches as well."

Sin smiled, "So, you can find the twenty, then?"

"I'll handle it." Gwaine nodded, "Though do you really think that will work?"

"Even dragons avoid the smell of a hellhound." Sin nodded, "Besides, your rat problem is the real problem."

Gwaine blinked, "Is it?"

"They're plague rats." Sin replied, screwing up her nose, "Black magic. The whole city stinks of it. I was trying to be polite, but it's getting kind of suffocating. The hounds should chase the rats away."

The regent nodded slowly, "You see a lot more than you let on, don't you, your majesty?"

"I'm a witch." Sin replied, "I'm mysterious. And bored. And where are my cupcakes?"

Gwaine sighed heavily, "About the speech..."

"Cupcakes!"

Episode Forty Two: Kim vs Penny

Penny put her head into the desk with a frustrated thunk. The witch had been so excited that morning for Kim's training session. However, the girl was an auramancer by birth. Learning a new magic wasn't impossible, but it didn't come naturally. It was difficult.

Getting most of the way there is easy. Getting the whole way was hard. Kim picked up the fried golem core, and sighed, tossing it into a smouldering pile in a nearby metal bin, and put down a new one. "You almost had it that time."

Penny rolled her head to the side, "Maybe I should just give up. I'm no good at this."

Kim sighed, "Oh, honey. You were doing fine. You almost had it. You just got the fuses around the wrong way whilst you were uploading."

"Like the last ten times." Penny moaned.

"Twelve, but who is counting?" Kim teased, and then sat down next to her, rubbing her back, "You know, maybe you should meet one of my godmothers. To hear how bad I was."

Penny sat up, "That has been bothering me a little, Kim. I've seen Dan's godmothers, I've met Sin's. I know that Chloe's are mostly sequestered away in their research tower... But I know absolutely nothing about yours. To be honest, I was doubting you had any."

Kim shrugged, "They mostly let me do my own thing. See... Well, one of them runs the tekmancy factory for Caerlorne. One is a researcher in Ogrinfeld, and the last... Well, she only visits once every couple years. Travels a lot. We keep up with letters and stuff like that."

"Ogrinfeld?" Penny asked excitedly, "I wonder if I've met her?"

"Doubt." Kim selected her answer, "Ferris hasn't been outside in about a decade. She hates the outside world. Too many insects, in her opinion. Oh, and she includes people who ask questions in that category, too."

"Ferris..." Penny mused, "As in Francesca Ferris?"

Kim nodded, "Yeah. You heard of her?"

"My godmother tried to get her fired, once." Penny said sheepishly, "They got into some argument. I don't really remember what over."

Kim laughed, "Sounds like Ferris. She's like that with everyone. Even herself."

Penny giggled, "Seriously?"

"I remember one morning when I was just a kid, coming downstairs for breakfast, and kind of wanting to hide because she was going off her rocker. Fullblown screaming match, threatening to throw things... She was arguing with herself about whether or not her maths was correct." Kim shook her head.

Penny relaxed a little and looked down at the golem core, and the crystal containing the program she was trying to upload. "You struggled with something this basic? Despite being able to do more advanced things?"

"No, I just struggled." Kim replied with a shrug. "I'm not like Dan or Chloe. I'm no savant. Everything I can do, I can do because I studied and tried. It was years before I could write a program with reasonable surety it would run on the first or second try."

Penny frowned, "But... Half of what everyone uses is your stuff. How does that come from no talent?"

"It comes from skill. Unlike talent, skill is earned." Kim replied, "You can have all the talent in the

world, and an expert can still take you on. Expertise can't happen until you find your way passed your limits. It takes effort. Also a lot of luck, but I cheated in that regard."

Penny frowned, "What do you mean you cheated?"

Kim smiled sheepishly, "One of my first programs with a wide-scale effect, was a luck-modifier. Something that pushes things in my favour, whilst decreasing the luck of everyone else in the entire city. I got in... Soooooo much trouble when my godmothers found out."

Penny cocked her head, "What? I can understand the idea. But luck doesn't really exist. Does it?"

"All random events have a probability of happening." Kim shrugged, "You can modify the probability of a number of them. If you have a ton of these little modifiers, then you end up modifying bigger things. It sort of... Snowballs."

Penny smiled slowly, "From small things, big things grow?"

"The basic building blocks of tekmancy are the same, all the way up." Kim smiled, "That's the point. Every single thing can be constructed from the very most basic blocks. All the more complicated things we pull in, are themselves constructed from the same basics."

Penny looked over, waving at one of the military golems, "Even that?"

"Especially that." Kim replied, "It runs off a dozen golem cores working in concert. Each golem core is made up of several hundred thousand tekgates, and every tekgate can be represented as either on or off. The cores are controlling magnetic resonance, by pulsing it. Every pulse is created by a series of tekgates."

Penny held up a hand, "I get it. I do. It's logic, all the way down."

"But you have to get the basics before you get to build the complex stuff." Kim nodded, "Sure, you can drag in libraries full of my stuff. Never understand the underpinnings. That's fine if what you're doing is just building stuff. But you want to be a master, right?"

Penny nodded, "I will become a Tekmancy Master."

"Then you need to understand it, properly. Every basic component." Kim shrugged, "So... Let's burn out some more cores."

The redheaded witch sighed and looked at the core, and began aligning the magic sigil for the transfer. Kim could have told her what had gone wrong every time. But Penny wasn't going to learn unless she got to make tangible mistakes. The auramancer was too used to everyone doing exactly what she wanted.

Tekmancy couldn't be influenced. It did exactly what it was programmed to do. Even if the program was stupid, and dangerous. Exploiting flaws in logic was always possible, but the program wouldn't be influenced. It was unforgiving. It required a certain way of thinking to be able to hold what a program would do in your head, and to be able to predict the rare cases which had to be accounted for separately.

Kim leaned back in her chair.

Teaching felt a bit odd. Most of the people who worked for her were already professionals. They were being paid for their expertise. Kim certainly wasn't a great teacher. That was well outside her knowledge.

She flipped the small core in her hands into the air, thinking idly. She'd been fairly successful at shrinking whilst increasing capacity, thus far, but there was probably some kind of limit to it. At a certain point you'd end up relying on resonance itself, and the laws of nature wouldn't let you go any further. That idea seemed like an easy enough paper to write, to pass around and let the academic community know she wasn't dead, or only making games.

Her entire worth in the industry was her name. The Kimiko name was what kept things selling, and

for that to keep happening she needed respect of both the people, and the industry. Making a game machine hadn't exactly impressed the industry that she was still on the cutting edge of things.

Most of the insults stung.

The golem core in front of Penny began to glow softly, rising and falling in intensity. The witch grinned, "Awesome! It works!"

Kim smiled. The witch did learn things quickly. She just gave up too soon. The sign of talent that had never had to work for anything before. Accidents were a part of life, they always are. Learning to do new things requires doing it wrong on occasion. A lesson that it seemed that Penny had yet to learn.

"Adorable."

Kim looked over, no longer surprised by her friend's antics. "So... I'm forgiven, then?"

"Nope." Sin replied, picking up one of the dead golem cores and looking at it curiously, "Detineo restituo."

The core flickered to life, and Sin blinked, "Huh. Didn't really expect that to work. Costly, though."

Kim took the core, looking at it in curiosity. It was depleted, and the capability level seemed to have dropped, but usually it was a waste trying to even recover parts. A burn out was a burn out. Except, it seemed, it wasn't.

Penny looked up, "Hey! That's not fair! I'm busting my butt to become a tekmancer!"

Sin looked down at her in confusion, as if she hadn't even noticed she was there. "Oh. Penny, right? The auramancer?"

"I want to learn tekmancy." Penny glared at her, "How come you can pick it up so quickly?"

"That wasn't tekmancy." Sin shook her head, "I'm a necromancer. Anything that can be thought of as dead, that's my domain."

Kim wasn't as sure. It seemed that some principles of necromancy and tekmancy must be the same for this to work. Which probably meant the technique could be learned. Not that Sin would be able to explain it clearly.

"So, if you're mad at me, why are you here?"

"Hiding from chores." Sin shrugged, "Also, Dan is mad at me and... I haven't really hung out with Chloe. It feels awkward."

Kim smiled and ruffled Sin's hair, "You always make me worry. You never take a second to think things through."

"Yes I do!" Sin glared, "It's just everyone else who doesn't."

Kim shrugged, "I guess that's true. No one ever stops to consider what a thorn in their side you might be to them. Which, honestly, is really weird. You're a necromancer. Literally the stuff of nightmares. And everyone tries to piss you off. You're too cute for your own good."

Sin giggled, and Penny glared, "She is cute, isn't she?"

Kim looked at her apprentice and sighed, "Please tell me you don't see her as a rival."

"She's better than me."

Sin blinked, "No, I'm not. I don't even understand emotions. Auramancy makes no sense at all, in my book. But you're a master. That's impressive."

Penny glared, "Good. It better stay that way."

"Sorry, Sin."

The hedgewitch blew her hair, "Fine. I'll go pretend to be king. Gwaine better actually give me cupcakes this time. I'll stop distracting your pupil."

Kim smiled, "Hopefully you'll be less mad at me next time."

Sin rolled her eyes and stood up off the table, and then turned, holding out a page of magical notes, "Here."

Kim took it, as her friend dissolved into black smoke. Which was new. Especially the lack of incantation. However, the page itself instantly seized her attention. It was a very thorough and detailed assessment of how Sin had used necromancy to restore the golem core.

Penny glared, "She can use psychometry, too?"

Kim frowned, "Huh. So she imprinted her thoughts into the paper? I guess that explains why it's clearer than most of her spell explanations."

"That's a spell that uses both animancy and auramancy!" Penny complained loudly, "I swear, Sin is my rival."

Kim sighed, "Penny, as a friend, and as a mentor, don't ever try to compete with Sin. She might seem like a disaster at times, and like a human girl a lot more of the time, but she's not. She's nothing like the rest of us. She will always surpass you and your expectations. Just be glad when she brings you along for the trip."

Penny glared, "She's my rival. I will surpass her."

"She's the King of Caerlorne."

Penny blinked in confusion, "King? Not queen? Then... That doesn't... She's the reincarnation of Artur? He was actually a thing? I hoped, but... Kim. Say something."

"Sin is Sin." Kim said with a small smile, "She might be the reincarnation of Artur, but it doesn't really matter if she is or isn't. One way or another, the Round Table have sworn their loyalty to her. She can also raise an undead army the like of which this world would never recover from. She's as dangerous as Artur was. But much cuter."

Penny frowned, "Your friend... You're trying to tell me that defeating her isn't possible. That every time I try, she'll get stronger in response. Because she's unpredictable, and dangerous."

"In a way." Kim shrugged, "More that... When Sin is cute, she's a great friend. But if you get in her way, you'll get stomped."

Penny grinned, "You might be right. I'm still going to try."

"I'll make sure the cemetery has a plot for you."

Episode Forty Three: Chloe vs Zuzu

Zuzu fell to the ground as Sin materialised from a black smoke, sitting on the zombie. The witch grabbed one of Zuzu's hands, ripping it free from the stitches, and held it up, flopping it back and forth, glaring.

Chloe's jaw dropped, "Sin! That's... Mean... Right?"

Zuzu smiled, "I don't mind. Besides, she's just checking in on my body. Making sure it isn't falling apart too quick."

"You tore her hand off!"

Sin looked over, "It's easier to work with, this way. Zu, it looks like you've got a problem, I'm sorry. Your circuits are decaying faster than I expected. You haven't been using a ton of magic, have you?"

The zombie shook her head, "Nope, just giggles. There was the vampire incident, though. He broke my neck. I think he also sent two mercenaries to shoot arrows at us."

Sin nodded slowly, "Yeah... I think I have an idea what's happening, but I don't like the implication. Chloe, can I take a look at your aura?"

The queen nodded, "Sure. You don't normally ask. Is something wrong with Zuzu?"

"Only very." Sin said, looking at her curiously, "Oh. Seems I'm right. That's not so cool. Chloe... This is going to sound bad."

The queen sat down on the edge of her bed, "I'm eating Zuzu's magic, aren't I?"

"Yes." Sin nodded, "To fight the infection. Your immune system is grabbing the closest magic source. Until I arrived, that was Zu. I'm going to have to do some repairs. Don't freak out."

The hedgewitch dropped the hand, and stood up, "Ready, Zu?"

The zombie rolled onto her back, "Of course. I lo-"

"Deservit navifactivae." Sin snapped her fingers. The zombie went quiet, and deathly still. The threads holding her various pieces together vanished. The hedgewitch picked up the slack-jawed head and considered it.

"You killed her!"

Sin didn't skip a beat, "I told you not to freak out, your highness."

"I'm a witch, too. I know you can't just push a soul back and forth across the veil. Not even your godmothers could, Sin!"

She held up a small notebook. On the cover was a golden seal. Sin tossed it to her, and Chloe looked at the book, "You sealed her into a diary?"

"It's a grimoire."

Chloe swallowed nervously, holding the volatile weapon. In the old days, witches used to keep all their spells in a single book, rather than looseleaf pages. It had two effects. The spells became stronger. The spells had difficulty being contained.

Certain spellbooks became so powerful, and uncontrollable, that they became almost self-aware. Those were the grimoires.

Chloe traced the cover's sigil, "Zu..."

"Zaraphiel." Sin spoke the True Name. "She's cute, isn't she?"

Chloe frowned, "You gave her a body to free her from the book."

Sin nodded curtly, focused on her work. Chloe smiled sadly, "You can't fix her forever. You should keep her away from me."

"That'll be her choice." Sin snapped, "Just because I can free her, doesn't make me her master."

Chloe smiled sadly, "Not liking being king?"

"No." Sin shook her head, "I'm... Supposed to be giving a speech. But I shouldn't be king. No one has a right to tell anyone else how to live. I'm a walking disaster. I can't be a city's idol."

Chloe smiled, "Crown's are heavy, aren't they?"

Sin touched the golden circlet on her head, "Mine's cursed. The only one who can take it off is me. If I do, I abdicate... And... I... Won't get... Born again."

Chloe winced, "That's... A serious curse."

Sin sighed, standing up, and snapped her fingers, "Zeraphiel, foras prodire statim!"

Zuzu snapped into a sitting position, resewn together. The zombie cracked her neck and grinned, "Love you, Sin."

The hedgewitch... No. With that crown, she wasn't a hedgewitch anymore. She was a king. The king. The king of Caerlorne raised an eyebrow at the zombie, "I told you to stop saying that. I am never going to feel the same way, Zu."

Zuzu shrugged, "So? I do. How are the upgrades?"

"Less mana flow, circuits that are more resistant to damage." Sin stated, and turned, "Chloe. The book?"

The queen held it out, and the zombie shook her head. "You should keep it, Chloe. If my body ever becomes too broken, I'll end up back in the old one. If you have the book, I know you'll keep me safe."

Sin facepalmed, "Another crush, Zu? Exactly how easy is to get inside your panties?"

Zu pulled her pants down, "Just ask if yoy want to see them, Sin!"

The king went pale, "Nobody wants to see that."

Chloe smiled and tucked the book into her bra. It was a touching, if somewhat disturbing present. Truth was, she could no longer imagine a morning where she didn't wake up to the bouncy woman. This was a friendship that she wanted to last for eternity.

"I've missed you, Sin."

The king nodded, smiling tiredly at her, "I know. I've been neglecting you. I'm sorry. I got caught up trying to... With Dan..."

Chloe couldn't help but smile, "Dan really did try and become a boy so that you would notice her, didn't she?"

Sin rubbed the back of her neck, "I said something stupid about liking tough boys. Knights with broad shoulders. Trying to pretend I was like the other animancy apprentices."

Chloe frowned, "So you just like girls, then?"

Sin grinned sheepishly, "Do you remember when we first met?"

Chloe frowned, "I must have been... Eight? You turned up on my windowsill with exploding cupcakes. I thought it was an assassination attempt."

“They weren’t meant to blow up.” Sin pouted, “I’ve told you that before.”

Chloe cocked her head, “Are you trying to tell me you brought cupcakes because you... Were interested in me?”

“Total crush.” Sin grinned, “Not that you ever expected it.”

Chloe laughed, turning red, “Oh, that explains so many things. Like the time you tried to read my diary and got frozen to the spot. Or when I caught you trying on one of my dresses.”

“No. That was just because I thought it would look cute on me.” Sin stuck out her tongue, and then shrugged, “I’m happy to have you as a friend, Chloe.”

The queen sighed, “I’m not your queen anymore, though, am I? And I think Dan forgiving you this decade is about as likely as -”

“A useless, orphaned, witch becoming king of the most powerful magical city that this world has ever seen.” Sin said with determination and grinned, “Chloe, I know I can be terrible at times. I know I’m impulsive, and rash, and can cause all sorts of wrong. But I also know that nothing is out my reach.”

Chloe sighed, “Rival city, if you’ve forgotten.”

Sin smiled, “Don’t piss me off, and we’ll be fine?”

The cryomancer clenched a fist, cooling the temperature of the room, “I might be sick, and out of things, Sin... But I am still queen of Wizeria. We’re a long way from being fine. Caerlorne is a danger to everyone. The fact they treat every other city as less than them doesn’t win them any friends.”

Sin raised an eyebrow, “Are you really trying to threaten me Chloe?”

“I thought I’d try it out.”

The hedgewith grinned, “I’ll rate that about a six. Not a fail, but not much of a pass. If you were healthy, and teamed up with Dan and Kim and could convince them to go to war... You might just equal Morgana, I and the Knights of the Round Table. Might. I don’t particular want to find out.”

Chloe swallowed nervously, “Nor, I.”

Sin suddenly scratched her head, “Speaking of... I knew I’d forgot something. So... I have a spy. In Ogrinfeld.”

Chloe rolled her eyes, “They’ve been making overtures for war. For about two years.”

“Not this time.” Sin shook her head, “They’re mobilising. Not just a show of force, either. The commandant is Henri du Lac.”

Chloe glared, “This one of the chores you were running away from?”

“Gwaine didn’t want me to tell you, actually.” Sin shrugged, “But, I figure having Wizeria between Ogrinfeld and Caerlorne is convenient. It’d suck if they took over. It’d give them the trading power to dictate terms.”

Chloe sighed heavily, “And in exchange you want...?”

“Dan to forgive me. But that’s impossible.” Sin shrugged, “Have fun with Zu. Also, watch out. With the reduced mana flow, her emotions will be stronger. Which means extra flirting.”

Sin dissolved like smoke, leaving Chloe scratching her head.

Like usual.

Episode Forty Four: Dan vs Rampancy

She brushed aside the vines as she tried to move further inside the house. It didn't feel like a house. Every single surface was covered in some sort of living thing. Flowers bloomed everywhere, moss and vines coated the walls, floor, and ceiling. The light seemed to be coming from somewhere deep inside the building.

Speaking of, from the outside it looked like a small one-room apartment. From the inside, it felt no small than the mansion where she had been raised. Endless hallways of greenery, with various rooms lying to either side.

Dan knew what this was. Knowing brought no comfort at all. The knowledge that a lion is home when you step into the den is not a comfort. It might not come home and surprise you, but it is still there, waiting to pounce and kill.

"You're a witch."

Dan turned slowly, looking at the young girl standing up and out of the moss in the wall. She nodded curtly, "Sin asked me to check in on you."

The girl glared, "I've had my fill of witches. And curses. You can leave."

Dan's wand spun in her hand, "Asvestus columbinus!"

The black sludge hit the vines before they could grab her, dissolving them away and revealing some of the apartment hidden beneath the magic. Dan shook her head, "I didn't come to fight. I could have just collapsed your little world into it's own dimension, and never worried about the consequences. I didn't."

"You stepped into my world." The young girl stamped a foot, "You don't get to leave unless I say!"

"I am Danierre de Amore." She said, bowing her head and sweeping off her hat. She stood upright slowly, "You, are an animancer."

The girl swallowed nervously, "Lady de Amore? The Heir to the Animancy Coven?"

Dan shrugged, "Not anymore. I'm... On my own, these days. You feel like a god, at the moment, don't you? Shaping this little pocket dimension to fit your fancies... But the feeling didn't last. You have to keep creating, or something terrible will happen."

"That's why you have to leave!"

"If I leave, I'll have to cut off your world." Dan replied, "To protect everyone else. Because you can't keep up with this. Eventually you won't be able to create fast enough, and the magic will eat you, and you will try and die. But you won't be able to. You'll end up somewhere in-between. You'll forget who you are. Rage and hate will consume you. And I'll have to ask Sin to come and kill you before you become a threat."

The girl went white, "Sin wouldn't do that."

"You're naive." Dan stated flatly, "Sin and I have both killed our fair share of wayward witches. Four witches protect this city. Do you think we rose to that position by always being kind?"

The girl shook her head, fearful tears appearing, "No! Sin is nice!"

"She is." Dan nodded, "Too kind. I am sick of cleaning up her messes, to be honest. She tries so hard to save people who just aren't worth it. Can you honestly tell me that you are worth my effort?"

The girl fell to her knees, looking down. Everywhere that her tears fell, moss and grass grew up, twisting. "No."

Dan smiled, despite herself, "Now... Why would you say that?"

The girl glared up at her, “Stop playing with me! Stop trying to manipulate me! Kill or leave me. I don’t care! Just get out!”

“Nope.” Dan yawned, “In fact, I don’t think I’ll do either of those things. You have heart, courage in the face of adversity. You have introspection. You can understand when things are your fault, even if you don’t know how you screwed up. You have instinctive knowledge. You didn’t attack me again. You probably could have, but you knew you would end up hurt. Yeah. I like you.”

The girl blinked back frustrated tears, “You like me?”

“You won’t like me, though.” Dan sighed, “You’re rampant. I can undo things, but they’ll fall out of control again. Which means I’ll have to bind you, before I can teach you how to use your magic properly. Which is going to hurt.”

The girl went to respond, to shout angrily. Dan didn’t give her the gratification. She couldn’t afford to. The garden around them had been responding to the rapidly fluctuating emotions. Growing thorns, getting darker. If it was allowed to attack, it might be able to hurt her. Without a coven, Dan didn’t have much of a chance of surviving a full-frontal attack.

“Ut orbis terrarum!”

Dan looked down dispassionately as the girl writhed, screaming and tearing at her skin. The room around them creaked and splintered, walls shattering as the creations of the young girl failed, one by one. The moss turned to ash as it died, and vines fell around her. Breaking the floor.

The witch turned as she saw the open door and opened it. She hesitated, looking out into the street as the room began its final moments of collapse. This was a decision her mother had frequently had to make. Dan had always been confused why her mother had saved so few, allowing the collapse of magic to kill the caster.

She understood it now.

She might not be able to save this girl from her own magic. A death like this was still a kindness compared to what would have happened when the magic finally escaped the grasp of the rampant caster, and turned her inside out, but immortal.

Dan turned and walked over, blinking as she saw Sin standing there, already holding the girl over her shoulder. She smiled and helped shoulder the weight, as they dragged the screaming and shaking girl from the violence.

Dan dropped her, and Sin put her down gently.

Sin sighed heavily, “You thought about leaving her.”

“I did.”

Sin glared, “Are you any better than Diana, Dan?”

“I am my mother’s daughter.” Dan glared, “I will always make the choices that you refuse to, Sin. I know when the world is worth more than a single life. One day, you will have to learn that lesson. Especially as King of Caerlorne.”

“The day I decide that you’re right, and learn that lesson…” Sin breathed out heavily, “I want you to kill me, Dan.”

She rolled her eyes, “Grow up, Sin.”

“Promise me, Danierre de Amore.”

Dan blinked, “You weren’t just saying that? You really want me to kill you, for admitting the world is the way it is?”

“You can’t change things by accepting that they are the way they are.” Sin stated, “I would rather live with false hope, than with blind apathy. Promise me, that the moment I lose all hope, that you will be the one to kill me. Swear it. With the Oath.”

Dan swallowed nervously, “Why me?”

“Because I might lose hope, one day soon.” Sin sighed heavily, “I’m not that far away from that edge... And everyone else will die if they even try. Chloe and Kim are powerful in their own ways, but they don’t stand a chance. Morgana might get close. Penny... Wouldn’t even realise I’d killed her before she fell.”

Dan glared, “What are you talking about?”

“I’m a necromancer!” Sin snapped, “If I lose hope, then I will become the thing that everyone is afraid of. Every legend and nightmare. Every lich, every ghoul, and every demon will fall at their knees and pledge their loyalty to me. The only human in this entire world who might have the slightest chance of even getting near to me, is you. I don’t want anyone to die because of me.”

Dan swallowed nervously, “It’s really disturbing when you actually acknowledge how strong you are, Sin.”

The girl smiled sadly, “I still can’t grow a flower. I can’t create a garden. I can’t bring joy to the faces of people who pass in the street. Only horror and fear. I’m a remnant of a time that would have been better if it was forgotten.”

Dan sighed, “You want me to swear the Oath, to kill you, if you lose hope. I... Can’t do that, Sin. I won’t.”

“Then you are putting either me, or you, above everyone in this city.” Sin glared at her, “You’re a hypocrit.”

“I know.” Dan nodded, “All the same, I won’t.”

Sin sighed heavily, “Have you spoken to Diana, recently?”

“I sent a letter.” Dan shrugged, “I haven’t heard back. Why?”

“Caerlorne didn’t forget our ancestor.” Sin sighed, “Do you know why Artur bound himself to a reincarnation cycle?”

Dan shook her head, “I assume it was some kind of accident. Massive magic of the scale that would need... That tends to be accidental. Unintended side-effects.”

“Unintended.” Sin mused, “You could say that. Artur wasn’t the one intended to be bound to the cycle. And, in fact, Artur was not their first life. A male witch happened because they were female in a previous life.”

Dan sighed, “I’m not really following where this is going, Sin.”

“Artur’s previous incarnation, was a witch known as Hera.”

Dan took a step backwards, “What?”

“Hera was caught in the magical explosion that bound a separate witch to the reincarnation cycle. An auramancer, by the name of -”

Dan put a hand over her mouth, “I know who Hera fought! I’m not a kid, I’ve heard the fairytales. Don’t say that name. If what you’ve said is true, then you being born means they were.”

Sin smiled grimly, “Dan, you have a piece of my soul. To her, you feel the same as me. Hera mastered all the magics of her time. Animancy, in you, and necromancy in me. She mastered pyromancy and aquamancy. She mastered auramancy and aimimancy. And she failed to stop... Her.”

Dan sighed, “So... If you go bad...”

“She’ll come for me.” Sin stated flatly, “And I will join her.”

“By blood and sinew, by faith and hope, by my very soul, I swear I will kill you if you no longer look upon this world with hope. I offer my own destruction if I fail in this duty.” Dan swore the oath, gripping her wand tightly as she felt the magic burning in her veins.

Sin relaxed slightly, “Thank you.”

Dan grabbed her before she could dissolve into smoke, glaring, “Sin... Where are you, really?”

“I’m leaving Wizeria.” Sin sighed, “Piece by piece. I’m taking care of things as well as I can. So that things don’t fall apart. But I can’t stay.”

Dan frowned, “You love this city. These people. You gave them up, for me. Did you know it at the time?”

“I might seem a thoughtless idiot, but I’m not.” Sin said through gritted teeth, “Saving you did not mean that I would ever get a chance to be with you, Dan. I’m a King. You’re not of royal blood. Not unless we tell everyone how you were born. And that would be nothing but a curse.”

“You didn’t want me to know.” Dan breathed out slowly, “Because you knew I wouldn’t be able to stay under my mother’s rule if I did. That it would make everything hurt even more than it already did.”

Sin shrugged, “Pretty much.”

Dan wiped an angry tear from her face, “I’m still an animancer. I seek out perfection. I’m not going to give you the right to see me upset.”

Sin kissed her cheek, and leaned back, “Dan, I think... You’re the one I’ll miss most. But now... I belong to Caerlorne. They need me.”

Dan shook her head, “The moment you announce yourself, she will come after you.”

“Better me than you.” Sin smiled sadly, “Stay safe, Dan. Protect Wizeria. Don’t forget the people in the lower levels. They won’t have anyone left.”

“I’m the hedgewitch, now.” Dan smiled, “Unable to afford ingredients.”

Sin grinned, “It isn’t so bad. You can find most things in the Dead Forest, if you know where to look.”

Dan let go of her hand slowly, “I don’t want to say goodbye.”

“Don’t.” Sin shrugged, “I’ll be around.”

Then she dissolved into smoke.

Without casting. Again.

Dan glared, that was one secret of Sin’s that she was determined to discover.

Episode Forty Five: Sin vs Hera II

“Hi.”

Her godmother sat down beside her, still stiffly upright. The woman didn't say anything, she just put an arm around her. It wasn't a warm hug. It was the smallest acknowledgement of the emotions that Sin might be feeling. It was also enough to make the tears start running down her face.

They sat silently for a while.

Hera pulled a vial from her cloak, at length and handed it to Sin. She looked at it, “Blood.”

“Yes.” Her godmother replied, “The blood of the first vampire.”

Sin winced, “You didn't find a cure.”

“I was not looking for a cure.” Hera stated, “That is the work of an animancer. I was looking for the source of the curse. Breaking a hex, that's our work. Or mine, I should say, my little king.”

Sin looked down, “I did what I had to.”

“Yes.” Hera nodded, “You did. You must now live with those consequences. That is what it means to be a necromancer. I am proud of what you did, daughter. I do wish that Chloe's situation hadn't been as it was, allowing you to finally kill that monster in human clothing. But we do what we must.”

Sin smiled sadly, “You're cute, at times. Makes me forget what a life we lead.”

“We take what enjoyment we can, when we can.” Hera stated. “The life of a necromancer is a life of pain. We are not called to care for the sick, but to interrogate the dead. We are not called to make beautiful flowers, but to kill the one who stole them.”

“You gave me the blood.” Sin said slowly, “Because of who I am. Right?”

“It is a fragment of hope.” Hera stated, “I cannot break this curse. It requires an animancer. A lost magic. The coven no longer exists in any city. Not in any shadow. No world has a home for them. Thus, we require someone from our past.”

“I barely get flashes.” Sin shook her head, “Mostly nightmares. People... Friends... Dying at my hands.”

“Artur was a monster.”

Sin looked up in surprise, “First I'm hearing.”

“He was a tyrant, goddaughter.” Hera chided, “He killed everyone who got in the way of his dream. That is not a hero. That is a monster. Someone who does what is necessary, always. Someone like Diana. Someone that an animancer would idolise, but the common folk, would not.”

Sin winced, “And the other one? What's she like?”

“She sacrificed herself to kill Artur, last time.” Hera shrugged, “They both died, in each other's arms. Not hating each other, but opposing.”

“I feel like that might happen between me and Dan.”

Hera smiled at her, “It might. What fool of a necromancer falls for a life caster?”

“A foolish one.” Sin blew her hair up, “A damned fool.”

“The heart always wants what it wants.” Hera replied, “I do not entirely understand your attraction to girls. Or at all, really. I do know that Dan is one of your oldest crushes. And that she might return your affection in some way. But it cannot be. I can support you with a girl, I cannot support you with a life caster.”

“They killed our kind.” Sin winced, “Didn’t they?”

“Yes.” Hera nodded, “But that isn’t why. Holding a grudge is pointless. But if you and Dan were to... Confess your love, and try and show it to each other... You would both become rampant. The magic cannot mix.”

Sin ground her teeth together, “Mix? That’s why we lose our magic. Isn’t it? If we love someone without any, our magic reaches out and touches oblivion rather than another.”

“Yes.” Hera nodded, “And the child of two witches is more powerful than any other witch of her era. She can cast both her parents magic.”

“Like your namesake. Me. I guess.”

“You’re still Sin.” Hera patted her on the head, “But yes, my namesake was raised by all the covens. Her bloodline was carefully planned, to give rise to her incredibly destructive power. A power she used to carry out her mother’s grudge against another coven. The aquamancers. Now their magic is lost to us.”

Sin grinned, laughing despite her tears, “You’re named after me.”

Hera made a sound of irritation.

“Did I like tea and cupcakes back then, too?”

Hera laughed softly, “No. As I understand it, Hera bathed in the blood of her enemies, and drank sanguine. She was not exactly the kindest of people to have ever been born.”

“She must have loved, too.” Sin said softly, wincing, “To be that angry.”

“Perhaps.”

Sin bit her lip, “Who is the other one? Is she as good as she was to stop me?”

“I’ve prevented you crossing paths, for now.” Hera stated, “I didn’t think either of you were ready for it. However, as King of Caerlorne, I cannot protect you anymore. She will find you.”

Sin frowned, glaring, “Don’t tell me that I’m destined to fall for her, too. It hurts bad enough that Dan rejected me.”

“Dan’s an idiot.” Hera said, being uncharacteristically kind, “If she has chosen to abandon you, despite the childhood you shared. Despite your willingness to overlook all of her flaws... Simply because she cannot overlook yours... Then I wish Dia all the luck in the world. But, there is a fine line between love and hate. Dia’s incarnation will find one, but not both.”

Sin smiled sadly, “Dia. Allmother. The witch from who we all come from. How many lives has she been fighting against me?”

“Maybe now, the fight is no longer necessary.” Hera stated, “You are not all Hera, goddaughter. You are only a part of her. Which means that you are different, and you have made choices that she never would have. You have forgiven so many acts of incredible evil. Including the one who tried to steal your life.”

Sin sighed, “No. I do hate Diana. I won’t hurt her, for Dan’s sake. Only for her.”

Hera patted her head, “That is more mercy than Diana has ever deserved.”

“You didn’t kill her.”

Hera nodded, “Yes. I allowed her to live with the guilt. To be punished by herself. I regularly dose her food and drink with the potion of the auramancers that heightens the depths of emotions. I torture her. Death would be an escape from that.”

“Psycho.” Sin teased.

She held the vial up, looking at it, "So... All I have to do, to save my friend, is rediscover a lost magic, reverse engineer a spell lost to time, and break the hex it causes."

Hera nodded and stood up, "Correct."

"Give me a month." Sin grinned, "It shouldn't take me that long."

"We do what we must." Hera nodded, before leaving.

Sin lay back on the tiles of the palace roof, looking at the twinkling of the sleeping city, and breathed in the cold night air.

She was Sin.

That was enough for her.

Episode Forty Six: Kim vs Penny II

Kim shook her head, trying to fight off the woozy feeling that was washing over her. She didn't know where it had come from. It just hit her like a golem. She raised her eyes tiredly, looking over to the other witch, who seemed to be working away unaffected.

"Pen... Ny...?"

The witch turned around in time to see Kim slump to the floor. She couldn't lift her head. It was just too heavy. Opening her eyes was effort. Things felt like they were spinning. She was glad that being a golem pilot had taught her stomach to stay down.

"Vitae summa!" Penny yelled, and Kim breathed a sigh of relief, touching her still-foggy head, "What the heck?"

Penny went bright red, "Uh... Might be my fault. Kind of. Mostly. Yeah. You can just blame me."

Kim touched her mouth as she fought the intense nausea, "No. Tell me. Like an adult."

The auramancer's shoulders drooped, "Fine. It's embarrassing. But during... That time... I have a small tendency to sometimes maybe go... Rampant?"

Kim glared, "The heck did you just say, witch?"

Penny looked down, "I have my period."

"Ew." Kim shook her head, "I don't much care about that part. The part where you go rampant. Most witches get killed when it happens!"

Penny smiled nervously, "Which is why I usually skip it. But I forgot, because I've been busy."

Kim stared, "Skip? I can skip it? How?"

Penny shrugged, "It stops you having kids, but basically it's just a hormone stabiliser. Reduce or removes the... Stops it happening."

"Witches can't have kids anyway." Kim shook her head, "Wow. So... If you're rampant, right now... Can we... Stop it?"

"Usually my godmothers lock me in a tower if I forget." Penny shrugged, "I can start taking the potion today, but it'll take a couple more for the rampancy to die out."

"Auramancy rampancy." Kim rolled her jaw, "What can Wizeria expect?"

"Mass everything." Penny swallowed, "Mostly in tune with my emotions. So... Right now, I'm feeling scared and guilty. Expect crowds to feel the same."

Kim rubbed her face, "Emeragus Dan! Emeragus Chloe!"

Then she walked over to the middle of the room, "I don't have a tower. But I do have a basement. Come on."

Penny walked over cautiously, "A basement?"

The floor jerked as it began to descend and Kim shrugged, "I can't work on all my designs out in the open. That's just asking for someone to steal them. Also, some of my ideas are dangerous, and need containment fields and all sorts."

Penny looked around, "Are those extra power generators?"

"My lab is off-grid." Kim smiled, "How else am I going to keep it secret? Also helps to block out any witch trying to run a tracer on me. Like you."

Penny grinned, "Well, I had to try."

Kim nodded as the elevator ground to a stop, and stepped off, waving around, "Touch anything and... It might kill you. Or I might. Most things are in a delicate state."

Penny nodded, "Not making me feel at home."

"This might." Kim replied, leading her down a hallway, and knocked on an office door. A moment later it opened, revealing the slime-covered troll, "Yes, Kim? Oh. You brought Penny."

"She's rampant." Kim grinned, "So you'll be keeping your distance. You cheat on me, and I'll let Chloe know where you are."

Penny went bright red, glancing between them, "Kim... Are you dating a troll?"

"He kissed me first." Kim replied stiffly, "Solomon can help you find the ingredients to make this potion you need. Both of you need to stay down here whilst we try and handle everything."

Solomon winced, "I can smell her. Leaving her with me isn't a great idea."

Kim grinned, "I could get Dan to freeze you in time."

Penny held up her hands, "Far out! You two! I'm not attracted to trolls. It isn't going to be a problem. Worst case, my boredom puts him to sleep. Like it almost did to you, Kim."

She grinned, "I know. This is just... How we flirt. We fight."

Solomon nodded, "That's probably true. Kim has been a bit upset with me, after finding out I lied to her about being human. Even though I never said it."

"You kissed me and shoved a glamour into my skull." Kim glared, "No girl would let that one go."

"You also threatened to kill me for doing that." Solomon laughed, "At the time, as well as every day since you found out."

Kim shrugged, "And you deserved it."

"Probably."

Penny facepalmed, "Heck, who dropped the amor bilem?"

Kim went a tinge red, "This isn't as fun as I was expecting. Mostly embarrassing."

Solomon shrugged, "I'll do my best, Kimiko."

"You better." She glared, and then hugged Penny briefly, "Just so you know, you're almost as disaster-prone as Sin."

The auramancer smiled weakly, "Sorry."

"That means you're fun, sweetie." Kim laughed, and headed back up and into her lab, just as two visitors arrived.

Dan let go of the zombie's hand, wiping it with disgust, with a cloth that she then eradicated in a burst of flames. The independent witch nodded to her, "Kim. Your message said something about rampancy?"

"Penny is rampant." Kim stated, "Apparently it happens a lot. I have her isolated, and the effects should disappear in a couple days, but until then... The emotions of an auramancer are playing out across the city."

Dan frowned, "So she's one of those kinds. I would have thought she would have synced up with you by now. Oh well. How is she feeling?"

“Bewildered, and excited.” Kim replied, “She’s in my personal lab. She nearly knocked me out with just boredom. I wouldn’t say any emotion is particularly safe.”

Dan glared, “And you’ve locked the lab down so that if I approach, it’ll kill me.”

“Yes.” Kim twitched, “You’re not killing Penny. We don’t have to.”

“If we can’t control this city, I will come for her.” Dan stated, and then sighed heavily, “But, I have a confession. I have an apprentice. I have her magic in stasis for now, but she’s rampant.”

Kim grinned, “Sin sent me a message. She was surprised.”

“I hurt her.” Dan stated, “Enough that she’s finally giving up and leaving the city.”

“Yeah.” Kim glared, “I wasn’t going to bring that up. Haven’t quite done enough brooding angrily on the subject.”

The zombie interrupted, “So why don’t we just balance the magic?”

Dan looked at the creature in surprise, “You know magic?”

“Zuzu knows lots of magic!” The zombie grinned, and snapped her fingers, “See! No more problem.”

Dan waved a hand, muttering under her breath, “Temporary. But impressive that you managed to counteract the auramancy in the air so quickly. How?”

“She’s a grimoire.” Kim said slowly, understanding. “A grimoire, given a body to allow her to roam freely. Wow. You must have been fun for the master who made you. All those spells.”

Zuzu frowned, “I don’t like remembering that.”

“Sorry.”

The zombie shrugged, and bounced over to the door, “We do have problems. Auramancy is addictive.”

Dan ran over, “Ah, crap. People already scratching. We’re going to have a mob situation out there soon, Kim.”

“Mounting up!” Kim shouted, waving her wand, “Assemblis!”

The alarm went out, calling every golem that could be remotely controlled into action. She couldn’t use the pilots. They could be experiencing the same heightened anxiety of everyone else.

Episode Forty Seven: Chloe vs Sin

She knew she was going to be in trouble when the others found out, and that Khan might use it as an opportunity to do something stupid, but she was going crazy being cooped up in her room all day.

She wasn't going into the city, too close to temptation. She was just escaping from the oppressive darkness of her room and embracing the starlight of the night sky, to float over the cold that was her city.

"Chloe."

She turned around guiltily, looking at the accusing voice that had spoken, "Sin? I thought you were -"

"Monitoring my best friend." Sin replied, arms crossed, "A vampire, alone, on a night like this? Stupid idea. You should have called me."

She frowned, "You're not going to force me to go back?"

"Nope." Sin shook her hand, sitting down on her broom and gliding next to her. "What do you say we have some fun? Been a while since you've been able to have that."

Chloe frowned, "If my blood pressure rises too high then -"

Sin put a finger to her lips, "You're with me, Chloe. The necromancer. You couldn't hurt anyone if you tried. I can command you. Which is rather disturbing to know, by the way."

"True. Also disturbing." Chloe nodded, "What did you have in mind?"

"Race!" Sin grinned like an idiot, "Me on my broom. You... As you. To the city wall and ring the bell. Like we used to."

Chloe laughed, feeling her fangs descend involuntarily, "You think you can beat a vampire at full pace?"

Sin moved from side-saddle to gripping her broom properly, "One."

"Two." Chloe tensed, feeling her muscles ripple and changing shape.

"Three."

The two of them snapped into action. Chloe sprinted across the city. She found it effortless and easy to leap between buildings, surprising herself by how quickly she moved, and how much control she had over it. Sin didn't have a chance to beat her.

The broom shot passed on her left, weaving between chimneys faster than Sin should have been able to react. Chloe's brows furrowed and she pushed herself harder, trying to find her limits as the flat roofs of Wizeria disappeared in a blur beneath her, and yet she wasn't catching up to Sin.

In fact, the witch was pulling away and extending the lead.

Chloe's only hope of winning this was the turn. To ring the bell at the city wall, you had to approach from either side. There was no opening to see it from inside the city. So that no ambitious archer could set off the panic of the alarm going off.

Chloe felt her back arch in pain, and she was suddenly moving forward even faster than her friend was flying. She could feel the wings on her back, but didn't particularly want to acknowledge that she had just partially transformed into a bat.

She grabbed the wall of the belltower, dragging herself around the corner as the stone crumbled, in time to see Sin emerging through the wall in a cloud of smoke.

They hit the bell together, silencing it.

Chloe fell on her butt, laughing. Sin dropped off her broom and landed next to her, a broad grin on her face. "I nearly fell off when you grew wings."

Chloe laughed, "My first time actually. No idea how to make them go away."

Sin grabbed one and spread it as Chloe gasped. Apparently the leathery things were extremely sensitive, in an embarrassing sort of way.

The little witch noticed. "So... You sure you weren't bitten by a succubus?"

Chloe glared at her, "You are not to tell Sammeth."

"Messaging him now." Sin replied, tapping her hat. "I got Kim to make him one. Want his frequency?"

Chloe swallowed, "He didn't tell me."

"He is under house arrest." Sin shrugged, "Didn't your spy in Populous tell you?"

Chloe glowered, "Khan has been keeping things from me."

Sin clenched a fist, "Well. I think it's time you and I had a chat with your rebellious little adviser."

"He has a right." Chloe sighed, "I'm a vampire."

Sin grinned at her, "Hera came back yesterday."

Chloe stared hopefully, "A cure?"

"Not yet." Sin shook her head, "Apparently the vampire curse is aimimancy."

Chloe winced, "Lost magic. I guess that's why none of the covens can break it."

"Breaking the curse was surprisingly easy." Sin frowned, "Unfortunately it also turned the victim to dust. I still need to work on it. But, I did find a way to suppress a couple of the symptoms."

Chloe blinked.

The queen frowned, thinking and then nodded slowly. "In the space of about a day... You rediscovered one of the lost magics?"

Sin shrugged, "I cheated. I asked Bel to find me a dead witch in the Underworld that might know it. She gave me enough to get started before she tried to kill me."

Chloe stared, "Seriously? What's it like, Sin?"

"It let me nearly beat you." Sin grinned, holding up her hand with a fresh scar on it, "Aimimancy is blood magic. So all the power comes from either you, or your enemy if you're mean."

Chloe smiled as she threatened to burst into tears, "You messed with a dead witch, and blood magic, for me?"

Sin shrugged, "What are friends for?"

Chloe sighed, leaning back against the wall, "We should get back."

"Not yet." Sin replied, pulling a purple vial from a handsewn pocket on her grass-stained dress. "This is my treatment. Take one a day, everyday. In return, no more hunger, and no more daylight problems."

Chloe took it carefully, "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Sin nodded, "I tested it. So... We're going to sit here and watch the sunrise. And then go and scare Khan together."

“You trapped and experimented on multiple vampires?”

“Necromancer.” Sin said pointedly, “I could make a vampire lick my boots clean.”

Chloe leaned her head on Sin’s shoulder, “You’re a good friend.”

“Take your medicine.” Sin reminded her, “And then... Relax.”

Episode Forty Eight: Dan vs Zuzu

“Privicia.” Dan waved her wand, cutting off the desperate man from escaping the quarantine area. Again. She was getting extremely tired of this. So many people, frantically searching for a feeling. Any feeling. The most intense emotions were nothing beside what the auramancer had touched them with. So they felt hollow.

“You have been isolated for your own protection.” Dan spoke slowly, please remain behind the barrier.”

The man growled, turning to her as he frothed at the mouth.

A whistle split the air and he collapsed. Dan looked at Kim as she reloaded her crossbow. It was slower than either of them would have liked, but Kim was still looking for a decent way to propel the sleeping darts across larger distances.

Dan grabbed the slumped man, and tossed him back across the line with the rest of the emotion junkies. She considered burning them all to a crisp. It would only take a single word. She couldn't bind them. The idiots had been willing to kill themselves in an effort to get free. They were mostly docile like this. Though one always broke away from the group.

Penny was going to have to do something to make up for this waste of her efforts. She should be with her new apprentice, guiding her through the delicate task of reawakening her magic. Not here, with these idiots who lacked a sense of self preservation.

“Bored.” Zuzu said and snapped her fingers, “Dormio.”

The entire crowd dropped onto their faces, snoring and the zombie skipped over to a tree, looking at the bugs on it with the fascination of a young child. Dan stared at her and back several times and then walked over to Kim and whispered, “What in the Underworld did Sin do to make her?”

Kim shrugged, “I have no idea... Do you ever get the feeling that Sin keeps the best inventions to herself?”

Dan just nodded hesitantly.

Kim frowned, “Didn't Chloe send a message about Zuzu's power being... You know... Weaker?”

“Weaker. But she's still a grimoire.” Dan mused, “An expert in a wide range of magic. Expertise can sometimes cheat our expectations.”

Zuzu turned around, stuffing a butterfly in her mouth. She spoke irritably through her mouthful, “Are you two still going on about that? I'm bored. Isn't there anything fun to do around here?”

Dragging a zombie around to see the sights sounded like an invitation to bring back the witch hunts. An invitation written in bright golden letters and projected onto the stars themselves. An invitation broadcast of the emergency speaker system so even the illiterate and blind would know to join in.

“Wizeria is a very boring place.” Dan said very quickly, “Wouldn't you rather hang out with Chloe?”

Zuzu glared, “Sin's right. You're a terrible liar. And a big meanie.”

Dan sighed heavily, “I don't want to say it's because you're a zombie... But it is. Dead things shouldn't walk around human towns. It freaks them out.”

She should not have said that. She should have remembered her impulsive that Sin could be, on a truly heroic level. That cute figures with demonic scale powers are not things that you deal with. You can't handle or manage them. You get out of the way and clean up the pieces afterwards.

“Dormio!” Zuzu screamed at the top of her voice.

Dan fell to one knee as her magic vanished. The entire leyline felt dry. As if every scrap of mana had been pulled from it and burned away. It hadn't even been this little magic when Sin broke the leyline.

Kim flinched, "It's not regenerating."

Zuzu skipped over, "I put the city to sleep. Come on. Time to see the sights!"

Dan staggered upright, "Zuzu... What about the leyline? Will it come back?"

The zombie cocked her head, "Why are you asking me?"

"Grimoire. Forbidden knowledge?"

The zombie shrugged, "I don't know anything like that. Maybe you should have asked Sin before she left."

The creature skipped on ahead of them, and Dan felt sweat beading on her forehead, "She has no idea, does she?"

"I seriously doubt it." Kim said in an equally strained voice, "Let's not push her."

The two witches hurried after the zombie as she bounced around with excitement, looking at the shopping stalls. Not that the stallholders could actually sell anything to her, because they were all out cold.

The arena wasn't anything more exciting. Warriors and fans passed out. It didn't stop the zombie from running up and inspecting every weapon. Squealing with excitement in the training rooms, and punching the wooden dummy. That part had to be cut short when she shattered it with a single blow.

Kim was doing her best to avoid the zombie possibly becoming bored, explaining things as if she were a town guide. The history of the architecture, famous arena battles. How the current arena trainer was a famous blademaker who fought beside Chloe's mother in the War of Ice and Fire.

Zuzu glared, "Boring. The war was more talk than violence. And barely any zombies at all. Ooh! I know where to find zombie stuff! Witch Alley!"

That was true enough.

Wizeria's covens were some of the largest in the world. Almost two hundred witches from every walk of life now lived in the city. They needed materials for rites and potions, so a small set of businesses had sprung up to service that need.

Around those, however, more businesses had appeared. Selling things like witch-styled clothing, and soft toys. Eventually, services for tourists had appeared as well. Witch-style dolls, pretend wands, and even make-believe spells.

Usually make believe.

Sin had swapped out the instructions for a love potion for a real one, once. One she'd stolen out of her mother's safe, as it was forbidden. Sorting out that mess had taken months.

Remembering it, Dan also seemed to recall Sin being unwillingly to explain why she'd done the prank, apart from it being fun. It wasn't like Sin had tried to dose Dan. An animancer wouldn't buy trash like that. The only significance was that Chloe had been doing her meet-the-locals routine, but Sin had only ever seen her as a friend.

Yet, if Sin said it wasn't for fun, she'd probably had a reason.

Zuzu picked up a stuffed zombie, her eyes glowing, "So cute!"

The zombie put it down slowly, "I wish I could but it."

“You could wake up the store owner.” Kim suggested hesitantly, but the zombie shook her head, “Nah, that messes with your head. Can’t tell if you’re awake or asleep for days.”

Dan produced a coin and slipped it under the sleeping man’s hand, “He won’t mind now, Zuzu.”

The woman beamed and hugged her plush toy so tight Dan half-expected it to pop with a cloud of duck down.

“Only one really big place left.” Kim shrugged, “Μάγος Tower.”

Zuzu’s eyes lit up, “The Tower!”

It was a no-brainer that the zombie would be attracted to that place. It had been built by an ancestor of Chloe’s. In fact, they claimed that it was inside that tower where they discovered, and refined, the magic of cryomancy.

The Tower was a series of levels, where each level was filled with every manner of beast and man. Every time a creature was slain, the Tower converted the dead into a new creature, leaving behind a handful of mana dust. The only way to move further up was to touch the crystal at the centre. The only way out, was to get to the top.

Zuzu sighed, “It’s closed.”

“Has been for fifty three years.” Kim stated, “Adventurers and young witches used to try and compete to reach the top, but as no one has ever actually survived, the Cryomancy Coven voted to -”

“Boring.” Zuzu glared, “Always boring. Dormio.”

Dan barely caught Kim before she hit the ground. This was completely out of hand. She should never have accepted Chloe’s recommendation to bring the creature along. It was only a matter of time before Zuzu removed her as well.

Then there would be no one left to protect the people.

Dan whispered quietly, “Emeragus Sin.”

The zombie smiled at her, “What was that?”

“Nothing.” Dan said, propping her friend up against the Tower. “So you find everything boring?”

“Kind of. I don’t mean to.” Zuzu said, making Dan feel guilty. Then the guilt deepened, “But I love my zombie stuffy!”

Dan smiled, “There is actually something else. But it is forbidden and off limits and secret.”

She hated herself.

It really wasn’t Zuzu’s fault that she was a complete psychopath. She was born from unstable magical power. The kind that acted as a storm, dragging people in and shredding them. There was no malice.

“Ooh! Everyone’s asleep! We can go.”

So Dan lead her to the grounds of the Animancy Coven. To the tower of senior witches, and down into the third dungeon. Dan touched the secret brick, revealing a spiralling crystal staircase.

Zuzu frowned, “Hope this was worth it. I don’t get why we couldn’t just port.”

Dan shrugged, pulling the zombie down the stairs, “Only one person has ever got passed all the defence systems. Which would be Sin.”

Zuzu realised her betrayal.

“Defence systems?”

The system took them both. Obviously Diana had revoked her access to the Eternal Library. So they would stay trapped, for eternity.

Episode Forty Nine: Sin vs the World

Her foot kicked Dan's side, hard. "Get up!"

The witch moaned, rolling over, "Five more minutes..."

Sin held up her hand, "Fulmen..."

Dan sat up quickly, tossing up her hands, "I'm awake! Don't kill me!"

Sin sighed heavily and sat down on the edge of the bed, "About bloody time. Now, do you want to explain things to me?"

Dan rubbed her head, and then scratched her itchy face, "I guess... Zuzu went a bit out of control. She put the whole city to sleep. Emptied the leyline. I had no idea what to do... But eventually she knocked out Kim for being boring, and it was just the two of us... So I trapped us in the library."

Sin rolled her eyes, "Great. Well, I've mostly cleaned up your mess. And I sealed Zuzu's magic. She can only use it if her master commands her, now."

"That's... Animancy." Dan swallowed, "How much crap went wrong when you were doing that?"

"Dan." Sin sighed heavily, "It's... Been a while. I can do animancy now. A little. Not a flower, still. But I fixed the bloody leyline, which took forever, bound Zuzu... And woke everyone up. Pulled you out of the collapsing crystal dimension you got stuck in."

Dan winced, and then noticed what she was scratching, "Holy... Of holies... Did I manage to grow a beard!? Finally? When did that happen?"

Sin sighed, "I was trying to ease into it. It's been a while, Dan. A long while. It took six months for your emergency message to reach me. Because of the damage to the leyline."

Dan stared, "I was trapped for six months?"

"No." Sin stated, "I came back after six months. I was worried before then, of course. We sent messengers... But Populous have had an army staked out around the walls, tossing demands. They had no idea they were besieging a city that was asleep. And I was pretty sure you all hated me."

Dan winced, "So... After six months you arrived, and found the broken leyline, and a bunch of dead people."

"Not dead. Near dead." Sin replied, "So I brought in healers from Caerlorne. We lost a few hundred. Not amazing, but not terrible."

"Then you took... How long to learn enough animancy to save us?"

Sin looked down, going red, "Eighteen months?"

"It's been two years!?" Dan shouted, "The heck!"

Sin clenched her fists, "I tried, okay? It was really hard work."

She burst into tears, shaking her head. "Morgana told me to give up and just let Wizeria die. She couldn't help. I found Penny locked in a basement, completely asleep and completely rampant. She burned out her magic altogether. I couldn't wake her. Even my godmothers were knocked out. I had no one to turn to."

Dan smiled sadly, "You never give up, Sin. When I sent my emergency signal, I knew you could save us, even if no one else could. We were just lucky you weren't caught up in this."

Sin looked at her tearily, "Is that your way of saying thanks?"

“Nope.” Dan replied, “Might have been two years for you. No time for me. I’m still mad at you.”

Sin glared, “Ut. Orbis.”

Dan held up her hands, “Holy crap, Sin! You’re going to strip my magic?”

“I spent eighteen months fighting, alone, for you. I found you and Zuzu is a collapsing crystal dimension. Do you even know how to locate another dimension? Let alone slow down the collapse long enough to navigate a space that has no stable set of rules governing it?” Sin punched the bed, “I should have let you die.”

Dan moved over to her slowly, and brushed her hair aside, revealing the scars, “You nearly died, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

Dan sighed, pulling the back of her dress, and looking down, “How many new scars are there, Sin?”

She brushed the hand aside, “Enough. Enough that I don’t want your usual attitude, Dan. I want you to actually thank me for doing something right.”

“I’d be dead without you.” Dan said, sitting next to her, “Thank you. I did miss having you in the city, even if you’d barely left. Wizeria felt different without you.”

Sin sighed heavily, “I.. I’m not coping. I nearly lost all of you. It was a long time to go through, on my own. No one here to help. Some tried, of course... But they have no idea what they’re doing. Even the head of the Caerlorne Animancy Coven is... Pathetic... Next to you.”

Dan sighed, “So... Fill me in. On all the crap.”

“There’s a lot of crap.” Sin shook her head, “First, the good news. I’ve cured Chloe. Completely. Well, almost. She’s not quite human anymore. But she’s lost the fangs, and can eat normal again. But she’s faster, stronger, and can grow wings.”

Dan laughed, “You invented the mythical daywalker. So, what was the key to curing a vampire? Is it something we can use against them? Break the curse for everything we capture?”

“Aimimancy.” Sin shuddered, “And no. I don’t particularly feel like passing this magic on. The world would have been a better place if I didn’t learn it.”

“Blood magic.” Dan winced, “So now you know both the magics that were considered most evil. Are you a villain, Sin?”

“Don’t joke about that.” Sin shuddered, “I actually am. Or I’m supposed to be. Artur was actually the bad one, not the hero. The other one, that everyone is afraid to name, she was the good one.”

“Victors write history.” Dan sighed, “Wow.”

“Chloe was the good news.” Sin threatened to burst into tears, “The bad news, now. Penny has lost her magic. Burned out. She’s depressed as shit. Woke up about a week before you.”

“Crap.” Dan swallowed, “She’s not a witch anymore. I think she was the only one of us who had never considered giving it up.”

“Kim’s missing. Well, not missing. I know where she is, but getting to her is harder than it was to save you, and I need help.” Sin sighed, “Somehow, I don’t know how, she was asleep near the Μάγος Tower. Which drags things into itself if they’re around for too long. She woke up inside.”

Dan flinched, “Is she alive?”

“Yes.” Sin nodded, “But I have no idea if it’ll stay that way. The only way to survive is to go up. To

conquer the Tower. Nobody who has gone in has come out. All we have are the instructions from the creator.”

Dan frowned, “You’re thinking of going in? Seriously?”

“It’s Kimiko.” Sin snapped, “I’m not abandoning her. I didn’t abandon you or Chloe. I will do whatever it takes, for my friends. So, I have some Knights that have sworn themselves to the cause. In case magic doesn’t work when I go in.”

“You’ve done too much already, Sin.” Dan sighed, “You can’t master two new magics, including a lost magic, and then go charging into the Tower. You’re not going to help anyone if you burn yourself out.”

Sin smiled and kissed her cheek, “I do what I have to. I’m a necromancer, that’s what we do. Whatever is necessary. Even if everyone else hates it. Or no one is willing. You’re right. I will probably die. But I’m doing it anyway.”

Dan sighed heavily, “You do that a lot, you know.”

“Yep.” Sin replied, “I’m not letting you forget. Even if you have completely rejected me.”

“I’m mad at you.” Dan stated, “Could you try giving me some distance until the embers have cooled off a bit?”

“I guess.” Sin replied, “I’m going to the Tower. You’re not. The city will need you. So, will that serve as your space?”

“Way to guilt trip a girl.” Dan glared sideways at her, “If I let you go, and you die, then I’m going to feel like crap.”

“You always feel like crap.” Sin replied and shrugged, “You might feel worse. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I am planning on surviving and conquering the Tower. I know I’m selfish. Especially in my feelings about you.”

Dan leaned on her shoulder, “I don’t hate you Sin. At all. You did effectively wreck my life, even if it needed wrecking. But I didn’t grow balls because I don’t care about you.”

Sin sighed, “Have you worked that one out yet?”

“I think I’m more comfortable with how I am.” Dan stated, “Itchy beard, itchy balls, and all.”

Sin giggled, “Okay.”

“You like girls more, don’t you?”

“You don’t want to hear my answer.”

Dan snuggled in against her, “You just like girls, then?”

“I still like you.” Sin sighed, “But the silver beard just sort of gives you an old man aura. Not that into it. But I know you are. So I’m trying to accept it.”

Dan frowned, “Did you kiss me whilst I was out?”

“On the forehead.” Sin answered quickly, “Once a day. Every morning that I hoped that you would wake up.”

“No taking advantage, then?”

Sin shrugged her off her shoulder, “Do you even know me?”

Dan laughed, and pulled Sin onto her own shoulder, “I know how to tease you, yes.”

Sin lay there, “We should go talk to the others, soon.”

“Not yet.” Dan smiled, “Soon.”

Episode Fifty: Kim vs Μάγος

She didn't know much.

She had no idea where she was, or why everything wanted to kill her, or why half her magic seemed to backfire and create more of the freaks trying to eat her. She didn't know why when she managed to kill one of them they dropped mana.

She did know that the mana they dropped worked better than her own reserves, and didn't seem to backfire. Maybe that was the point of this place. That the only way to survive was to hunt down others and kill them.

It was a place of pain and torture.

There was no food, and no water. Not even the bodies of the slain, as they dissolved into mana. The only way to survive was to use magic to prop up your own body, and there were rules to that. The longer you lived on pure magic, the harder it was to use magic at all.

Eventually it would slip from your grasp, and send you rampant.

Then you either died or burned out, and as there was no food, or water, that would mean dying as well.

She guessed that she could make it maybe another week before she lost control. Her magic wasn't well suited to a battlefield like this, and it wasn't suited to sustaining her own life. It was a magic to create things. It wasn't animancy.

Whoever put her here, didn't seem to be seeking anything other than entertainment. They hadn't given her any directions. No hint as to how to pass a test. They were just waiting for her to die. Probably cheering her on, or booing her. This felt like an endless version of the arena, with less show and more death.

There was no safe place or time to rest. All she could do was trap an area and hope that she woke up in time to get away. The exhaustion was running her down, and pushing her fragile hold on magic.

When she found whoever had put her here, she was going to torture them to death. Using several new inventions that had sprung up from the heat of the hatred that was burning in her heart.

She rolled to the side, raising her arms and dragging the dirt up into a shield a moment before the screaming ogre shattered it, knocking her head over heels. Kim groaned painfully as she pulled herself up. She didn't have time to ignore the pain, or she would be dead.

"Fulmen ignem!" A voice screamed in the distance, and Kim hit the dirt, rolling it over her into a shell.

She felt sweat running down her face as the shell of dirt around her began to glow red hot. Whoever had just cast what was supposed to be a basic pyromancy spell had done it at a ridiculous level, which probably meant they had managed to summon even more creatures to attack.

That witch was just going to get them all killed.

The dirt in front of her face crumbled, and she blinked, staring into an ash-stained face, that was extremely familiar. She tossed the dirt off, standing up weakly, and looked around in shock. There was nothing attacking, only a stillness.

Ash rained down from everywhere, and Kim swallowed, "We don't have long. They'll regenerate."

"Duh." Sin replied and took her hand, "But the crystal for the next level is in the middle. Come on."

Kim was in too much shock to resist as she was dragged across the field. It wasn't just Sin here, either. They were surrounded by knights, running in formation, spears at the ready. On each of them was the symbol of Caerlorne.

"Are these the Knights of the -"

"- Round Table." Sin finished, "We've got less than three minutes. If you use any magic in that time, you'll cancel the countdown, and we'll be screwed again. So shut up, and run!"

Kim didn't know exactly where Sin was running to. She'd never found the edges of this place. So how exactly did it even have a middle to speak of?

Sin pointed up above her, "Misleading dimensions. There's a roof, though."

Kim glanced up and nearly kicked herself. There was a reflection of a gigantic crystal in the middle of the roof. The roof wasn't reachable, and nothing had ever attacked her from it, so she hadn't paid it much attention. There were no features or lights or anything. Just the barely-visible reflection that Sin had obviously spotted.

Kim had been here for so long, and Sin just walked in and solved the puzzle.

That was just like her.

Sin held up a hand, and the knights stopped, fanning out. She crouched, looking down a hill to the gigantic crystal, and Kim frowned, "I thought you killed everything."

"I'm not a god." Sin replied, "It looks like one of those things is stronger than the others. Faster."

Kim nodded slowly, "It always goes for the strongest thing in area. If you can convince it something else is stronger than you, it'll leave you alone."

Sin rolled her eyes, "Crap."

Kim looked over at her, "Always the strongest in a room, aren't you?"

"Nowadays." Sin muttered, and then stood up, "I was really hoping not to use this crap after helping Chloe. Nothing for it."

The witch held up her hands, and began to chant. As she did, the monsters in the valley below them began to stir, but the larger one began to twitch, as if it were fighting with itself.

"Sanguis volu, sanguis rursus."

Kim looked at her friend in concern as she recognised the words, but not the incantation. What exactly had Sin delved into this time? And since when was there a forbidden magic of any kind that the hedgewitch was hesitant to use?

"Sanguine ortum, sanguinem ulcus."

Sin wasn't a hedgewitch anymore. She wasn't even wearing her traditional beat-up witch's hat. Her face wasn't the kind and cheeky thing that Kim knew. The girl had aged, matured. Grown hard. The only thing atop her head now was the crown. Just how long had it been since Kim had woken up here?

"Conversus ad iram, excindo!"

With the last syllable the creature below suddenly began to lash out at the smaller things surrounding it. As it did, Sin grabbed her hand and jumped, dragging her down the hillside, skidding most of the way towards the crystal.

The knights ran with them, fending off some of the creatures that noticed the prey approaching.

Kim's hand touched the blue crystal.

There was a flash of light, and she found herself standing with Sin and the Knights in a wide open space. It didn't have any clear form to it. Like someone had cut the top off a field and dropped it onto a blank piece of paper.

Sin let go of her hand and collapsed, wiping sweat from her forehead, "That sucked. So, hey Kim."

The tekmancy crouched next to her friend, "I have questions."

"You're in Μάγος Tower." Sin said grimly, "Dragged in, whilst the city slept. You've been here for two years. I'm surprised you survived, to be honest."

Kim swallowed nervously, "Two years? Is that all? What the heck happened to you, Sin?"

The witch grinned at her, and hugged her, "I missed you too, Kim. I've been saving everyone. I guess I forget to smile sometimes, now."

Kim nodded, "Also, that was... Blood magic. The heck?"

"I used it to cure Chloe." Sin flinched, "If you have any sense in your head, you'll purge those words. Not a single stroke of a letter of that magic should ever be allowed to survive. It is evil, Kim. All of it. There is no saving grace. It is a magic that is created for the sole purpose of bringing harm to others. To rob them of their own will."

A green knight crouched, "Your highness, the space is becoming unstable."

Sin shrugged, "I noticed. I guess we have to pick our reward for surviving. I choose... Kimiko."

The tekmancy felt her exhaustion disappear as if a wind had hit her in the face, and she held up her hands, looking as the hard-earned callouses softened and gave her skin the gentleness she expected from Dan.

She looked up, and swore.

They weren't out, or anything close to it. She could see new forests, and new mountains, and flying creatures overhead.

Sin bounced up and down, "Pterodactyls! I am so catching one!"

Kim rolled her eyes, and then flinched as she saw a wolf padding through the knights. She spun, pointing her wand, and Sin caught her wrist, "I'd rather you didn't kill my puppy. He came with. He's just good at hiding."

That wasn't a puppy. It was a full-sized wolf, shoulders as tall as any of the knights. Heck, it wasn't even just a wolf. She could see the intelligence in the eyes, and the hunger lying there. The golden eyes of a werewolf. Sin thought this thing was her pet? It'd murder them all.

The creature sat down next to Sin, who idly scratched at its neck, "Knights, we need a place to set up camp, until I can locate the crystal that will bring us to the next level. Gwaine?"

The green knight nodded and began issuing orders.

Kim felt too overwhelmed, and collapsed.

Episode Fifty One: Chloe vs Populous II

She walked into the great hall slowly, her foot steps quiet and slow as she moved across the tiled floors, her dress dragging around her as the handmaidens held the train behind her.

The queen stepped onto the red carpet laid down the center, moving up slowly. Either side servants and knights bowed down as she passed, as her gaze held the man standing beside her throne in her eyes.

The queen moved up the two steps to the throne, slowly and deliberately. She turned around slowly, looking at the hall of men and women who depended on her. They were confused, and afraid, but they offered themselves to her without question.

Chloe sat down on her throne, and nodded slowly, "Bring them in."

The doors of the great hall reopened, this time revealing a party of three. A knight in bloodied armour. A frightened scribe. And a king who stood above his own, his eyes full of fire and hatred as he moved towards her.

Her servants made no expression, or sign of deference, as he passed them by. The king who had once again brought war to the edges of her city, and brought the strife of death to those that clung to her in search of peace.

He paused at the end of the carpet, and raised his foot, placing it on the first step.

Chloe looked down at him with hatred, "King Ereth, of Populous."

He smiled up at her with knowing arrogance, "Queen Chloe, of Wizeria. I have come to spare your people. Slaughter is not necessary. Your secret weapon is lost to the Tower. Your people are starving, and a plague is in your lower sections. Surrender. Become my vassal, and we can spare the expense and horrors of war."

"You came because you were invited." Chloe replied with an icy gaze, "You stand here, by my generosity. Your insults have not been ignored. You believe this city to be without defense, but we have not yet begun to fight. If you have any mercy for your own in your twisted corpse, you will surrender and agree to my terms."

Ereth raised an eyebrow, "What terms could you possibly have the power to enforce, witchqueen? Your city is done."

"I am a witchqueen." Chloe stated, "I am born of magic. And so is my coven. You do not merely go to war with the people of Wizeria! You go to war with the most powerful covens ever assembled on the face of this world. You believe that Wizeria stands alone, but we do not. We have never been alone."

Morgana stepped out of the shadows behind the throne, and walked up and kicked Ereth's foot off the step. She glared at him, "I will not allow you to show such callous disrespect. You are a king, behave as one."

"Another witch?"

"I am Morguin of Avalon!" Morgana snapped angrily, the light being sucked out of the room, "I am the advisor to the Caerlorne throne. I was the consort of Artur of old! I am the Drake of the Pendragon bloodline. I am the sister of Magause, and the goddaughter of Nemain. I am the Witch of the Morrigan. When you address me, petty king, you speak to one of the ancients of this world. Your rule is by our authority!"

Ereth raised an eyebrow, "Intimidation tactics, using ancient legends that are practically forgotten? What is this, witchqueen?"

Chloe leaned forward, "So. You defy the authority of the Morrigan, then?"

Ereth shrugged, "Of course. They don't exist."

Chloe leaned back, "It is on your own head."

Morgana turned around and walked back behind the throne. Chloe's servants turned away as one, and began tying the bandana's over their eyes. She had anticipated his response. Had known he was stupid enough to forget that the four cities only existed because the Morrigan permitted it.

The light left the room, and Chloe watched without a single emotion. She didn't dare to show approval or disapproval in their presence.

The black knight fell to his knees, choking out his last breath. The scribe collapsed, holding his heart and crying out in pain.

Ereth glared at her, "Petty tricks, witch? You can't kill a king and get away with it."

"I am not to blame." Chloe reminded him, "This is on your head. You defied them."

Ereth turned around with boredom, and froze as he finally saw the three figures silhouetted in front of the great doors. "They don't exist!"

One on the left stepped forward, moving like a wraith across the ground. Her clawed hands stroked his cheek gently, "Did not your father remind you to fear us?"

Ereth swallowed nervously, "You're just a faerytale. This won't work, Chloe. I will not be controlled by lies and myth!"

"Chloe cannot help you." The wraith-like figure spoke, "She dare not move at all. I am the one called Nemain. We three created the rule of kings. There was a condition attached."

Ereth swallowed nervously, "You can't."

"Populous has fallen. It's people lie dead." One of the others spoke quietly, "We came only out of respect for the title. The city will be lost to the sands."

"Not quite true, Baba." The other said, "We came to punish this fool who thought himself a god."

Nemain smiled as her fingers plunged into his eye sockets, "We take from you, your sight, oh king who thought he foresaw the future."

Chloe couldn't move. All she could do was watch.

Baba appeared beside the man, "We take from you, your hands. Oh king, who thought that he could control the future."

She didn't dare to react. She could feel her stomach turning. Feel the pity she had for him, and the horror for the act.

Macha struck the man down, her hands carving his feet away, "We take from you, your feet, oh king who thought he walked the path to the future."

Nemain picked up the ragged man, at the edge of death, "I deny you, death. I deny it to you for now, and forever. Never again will harm befall you. All you will know, all of your days, until the days themselves run out, is the screams of children running from your distorted figure."

The Morrigan tossed aside the wreck of a body, and then picked up his crown and glided in front of Chloe, hovering above her head. The queen inclined her head gently, and Nemain laughed, a cackling sound. "No need to bow to me, *Χλόη Μάγος*. You serve one greater than even us three. To her all is owed. If I laid a hand on but a hair of your head, what is it that Selene would do to me?"

Chloe knew the name, if only just. It was a name she only knew because she was queen. She had never heard Sin refer to herself by her birthname. She might not even know it.

Nemain placed the crown into Chloe's hands, and lifted her chin, the blue eyes of the wraith looking directly into hers, "Sammeth is unharmed. The orphans of Populous are now in Avalon, with my own people. We are not unkind. Nor are we any enemy to you."

Chloe swallowed, "Thank you."

Nemain cackled at that, "She thanks me. I am, and always have been, the protector of those who have none to care for them. That is what it means to be a witch of the Morrigan. Our immortality comes with the cost, the joy, of serving in that capacity until the end of days."

Baba stepped forward, "We must leave. We have done our duty, we can do no more."

"We must do more, this time." Macha disagreed, "She must know the prophecy. Selene must know, and we cannot tell her."

"The Tower." Nemain agreed, "We cannot speak to her. I entrust it to you, witchqueen. Atop your Tower, lies a soul forgotten. A soul that must never be freed. The Tower is a prison, to hold back the one who is the other."

Chloe winced, "Sin is there. She will complete the Tower. The soul... Will be freed."

"When that happens, Selene's fate will be sealed, and she will die." Nemain said morbidly, "She will never return to this world. It will be over and done."

Chloe felt a tear struggling to emerge, "Then Sin is damned."

Nemain stroked her cheek, gently wiping away the tear, "That is not fault of yours, queen. There is none who can stand against Selene, and succeed. There is none but one. When they fight, the end of days approaches. None of us may deny the end of days. Not the Morrigan, not the Cryomancers, nor the Necromancers. The end is simply that."

Baba sighed, "We have done more than we should."

"Quiet, sister." Nemain snapped, and then looked back, and Chloe felt confusion to see such pity on such an old and cruel face. Especially as she'd just seen the woman tear a man's eyes out. "Long and hard is the road ahead of you, Chloe. I cannot envy you, that. Know that my thoughts travel with you."

Chloe smiled, "Thank you."

Then the three were gone, the light was back, and a king lay scrabbling blindly on the floor.

Chloe waved a hand, "Make sure he doesn't bleed to death."

What had Sin got herself into this time?

Episode Fifty Two: Dan vs Populous

She wiped the back of her hand on her face, smearing the blood there, as she stood against the army. Her wand shook in her hand. She could feel herself approaching her limits. Whilst the king spoke with Chloe, he had given the order to attack. This wasn't the slow pace of a siege. This was the end.

"Speculum emeragus!" Dan yelled, appearing on the surface of the boulder as it came crashing down towards her city, and her home. To take her family from her. To kill every man, woman and child for the sake of a man's ego.

She cast the spell into the boulder, "Rima fissura!"

She fell away as the boulder turned into tiny fist-sized stones, peppering the shields of the soldiers on the wall as the archers let loose their volleys. Dan caught hold of her pterodactyl as he swooped in beneath her. She righted herself, and then tossed a series of fireballs into the ranks of the enemy. "Fulmen ignem!"

She leaped from the dinosaur as it swept across the plain, rolling as she hit the ground, standing up and raising a barrier as the soldiers swept towards her. "Privicia!"

She was out of breath, and out of time.

No matter what she did, she was screwed. No witch could stand against this alone, and the only two witches they had who could raise armies were trapped inside the Tower. Even if they somehow managed to survive, they wouldn't be back in time. This was her end.

"Servare matrem suam nos!"

Dan spun around, staring in shock. Atop the gatehouse, she saw her young apprentice standing, shaking, as she channelled magic that she shouldn't be touching. She would burn herself out.

The weeds around her whipped through the air as they grew up, heeding the call to protect the young witch.

Dan nodded and turned back to the battlefield, "Fatigatio ruina!"

She saw the soldiers hesitating, as the tiredness hit them a moment before the green army crashed into them. Shield against shield. Weapon against weapon. There were no victors in a battle like this. It would continue until one side was more tired of dying than the other.

Brutus swept her up in a claw, and dropped her beside her apprentice. Dan collapsed, a blood-stained hand barely holding onto her wand as she staggered upright, "What of the queen?"

"I'm here." Chloe put a strong hand on her shoulder, "The Morrigan killed the king. And Populous."

Dan nodded grimly, "Then there is no going back for them. They will fight until the last man."

"You've done well, Danierre." Morgana said, emerging beside her, "But there is still one thing even these fools will remember."

Dan looked tiredly at the witch, "Spit it out."

"I am the Drake of the Pendragon line." Morgana stated flatly, and pulled a vial from her coat that Dan barely remembered. From the Potion Tourney, a happier set of days that seemed so unfamiliar and so long ago.

"Halcyon draco."

Morgana swallowed it, and then jumped from the gate.

Dan felt Chloe put an arm around her, steadying her, as the dragon burst into view above the army. The screams of terror burst from them as every instinct told them to run as the white-scaled beast landed

on the battlefield, roaring and billowing flames.

Her apprentice leaned into her, and Dan smiled down at her, "You did well, Gwen."

Chloe smiled proudly, "We all did. We are the Witches of Wizeria. We will never, ever, let our city fall."

Dan breathed out tiredly, "Anyone have any idea about Sin, and Kim?"

"They're alive." Gwen said stubbornly, "More than that is the realm of prophecy."

"Sammeth is alive, too." Chloe said with a hint of irritation, and Dan laughed, "Of course you're worried about your boyfriend. Despite his father trying to murder us all, literally in our sleep."

"Not his fault his dad is a dick."

Dan nodded, "True. I think I can get on board with that. So, what's happening to Sam? You going to protect and hide him?"

"I was thinking of proposing, actually."

Gwen rolled her eyes, "Are you two really talking about romance as one of your friends eats an army in front of you?"

"We're witches." Dan stated, "We do what we have to, to survive. Always."

The young girl just rolled her eyes. She was too young to realise that in the face of overwhelming darkness, any scrap of light was worth clinging to. If Dan could change the future to protect her from having to learn that knowledge, then she could consider her life achieved.

"What's the zombie going to do if you get married?"

Chloe coughed nervously, "Hopefully stop turning up in my bed naked."

"She's been doing what?" Gwen laughed nervously.

Chloe shrugged, "I think she's been trying to apologise for cursing us all to sleep. Plus, she has a crush on me. Hopefully she'll go back to crushing on Sin instead."

"Not with you holding her diary." Dan laughed, "Speaking of diaries and secrets... Anyone know what happened to Kim's boy?"

"The troll?" Chloe asked, "I think he's been hanging out with penny. Trying to help her deal with losing her magic."

"I have some thoughts on that." Dan said with a smile, "With Gwen's help, of course."

The apprentice looked between them, "You're both nuts, aren't you? We just nearly lost the freaking city! Two of your friends are doomed, and you're talking like they'll be back. From something no one has ever escaped from."

Chloe and Dan shrugged and spoke as one, "She's Sin."

Hera appeared in front of all three, and turned, bowing her head slightly, "Queen Chloe. Lady de Amore. I have a message from my goddaughter."

Dan rubbed her eyes, "See what we were talking about, Gwen?"

"Guenivere's true line, is the Pendragon line." Hera stated, and then frowned, "Some rambling about cupcakes and explosions which made no sense at all... And finally, that she has reached the eighteenth floor of the Tower, with Kimiko. Who has apparently created the nanovore successfully."

Chloe giggled, turning red, "Oh, Sin. She never changes, even when she does."

Hera rolled her eyes, “No. She left her room and her pocket dimensions an untidy mess. I’d appreciate it if one of you could come clean them up.”

Chloe frowned, “Yeah. I’m going to pass on that. I can give you a royal edict, if you’d like.”

Dan grinned, “I’m a godmother now. But I don’t think Gwen is quite ready for the deathtrap of Sin’s bedroom. Could it wait five years?”

Hera made a sound of derision, and descended back into the ground.

Gwen looked at her godmother with concern, “Your friend’s bedroom is a deathtrap?”

“She’s probably the most dangerous witch that I’ve met. And lazy. And tends to leave experiments half-cocked.” Dan laughed, “Dying would be the kindest thing that could happen if you stumbled into any of her security measures.”

Morgana fell beside them, shedding scales, and coughing ash, “So... We ready for what comes next?”

“Since when are we ever ready?”

Index

Book of the Dead

A necromantic book that contains the records of the lives of anyone who has ever died.

In the case of those who become undead, the book also records the events that follow their death.

Strangely, the mysterious figure of Artur does not appear in the book.

Mana, the Channeling

A card game, popular among the kinds of people often found locked in their bedroom. Even hardcore magic fans tend to stay clear of this crowd.

The game apparently involves an enormous number of rules, and an infinite number of imaginary scenarios.

Almost all famous witches have a card, though the depictions on them, and their stats, rarely reflect their real world attributes.

Fire magic is strong against ice magic.

Ice magic is strong against tekmancy and necromancy.

Animancy is “pretty overpowered.”

“Auramancy just trounces everything else.”

Card 106 | Secrets Stash

An action card that allows one to temporarily hide the cards in their hand. Each turn increases the likelihood that the Secrets Stash will lose effect.

Written on it:

Secrets are eager to escape.

Card Unknown | Χλόη Μάγος

Depicts “a huge-breasted warrior with riding a polar bear”, enscribed with the name of the queen of Wizeria beneath it.

Card Unknown | Penelope van Decker

Speciality is allusion magic.

Male players take a luck loss going up against her.

Special move, disintegration potion.

The card is banned in competition.

The card is relatively rare, only appearing in a single printing.

Morguin of Avalon

A famous play from the Artur cycle of epics. The play is a comedy, it has a happy ending for the two protagonists, and features an evil antagonist that has little background.

It is considered both simple and beautiful by most witches.

It is often the first romance story that a person living in Wizeria will encounter whilst they are growing up, and includes some of the foundational concepts of romance, such as betrayal, unrequited love, as well as chivalric concepts like faithfulness in hard times.

Spells

Phantasmia Organia

A terraforming spell, supposed to be used to transform an entire planet into a habitable zone. Combines both alchemy and casting magics.

A spell utilising aspects of both animancy and necromancy, this spell is extremely difficult to cast for a witch of either of those tribes, let alone anyone else.

Emeragus

Usually followed by a name, a spell to alert someone of an emergency. Relatively easy to cast for a witch of any tribe. Purely a casting magic.

Creepius summonae

A summoning spell used to transport people and objects by utilising the Underworld and its denizens as the method.

This is a necromancy casting spell. It generally freaks out those from other tribes, due to the screaming of the Underworld that can be heard.

Cryaqua

An ice potion spell of the Cryomancy tribe. Invented by Chloe's grandmother. Allows any object to appear as see-through ice for a short time.

Teknovore

A summoning potion, used to construct a rudimentary golem in an instant. Only useable by the teknomancer tribe.

Temporalis borealis

A spell used to modify spacetime to transport an object from one location to another. An invention of Chloe.

Portentia potentia

A casting spell of Necromancy, used to summon the largest army of undead that current magical supplies will allow. Known for causing unexpected problems as maintaining control of the army generally requires more magic than was available when summoning it.

Animatia automatia

Brings inanimate objects to life. A cast spell from the animancy tribe.

Variations of this spell have been known to be used by tekmancers attempting to enhance their creations, with varying degrees of success.

Forbidden Rite of the Homunculus

A necromantic rite, requiring a circle of blood, and candles, in a certain arrangement. Darkness, and a cave, is also preferable.

A chant is also required:

By darkest night, by brightest day, these three things unite. Of blood, and bone, and sinew!
Stitch the universe together, bring to life where there was none!

Regretus manifestus

Forces the victim to re-experience the regrets of their life. This is a necromantic cast spell, but employed by bullies across all the tribes.

Oblivia darkus

A necromantic cast spell that banishes a victim to a dark oblivion.

Mobius dimensia

A necromantic cast spell that causes physical space to be distorted. Can be used as either a defensive or offensive spell.

Unconfirmed reports exist of a hedgewitch who learned to use the spell to create a water slide.

Iciculus tablus

A cryomancy cast ice spell for growing a table out of water particles in the air. Not particularly practical without gloves.

Imperius immobilus

A cast ice spell for freezing a person solid for a temporary amount of time.

Asvestus columbinus

A cast spell of absorption often used to eradicate hard to contain magical effects.

Summons water from the Underworld to contain the target, making it a necromantic spell, but employed by almost all schools of magic on a regular basis.

Liquor obscurum

A necromancy potion made to be used as part of a rite, invented by Hyacinth Rasputin Artur (Sin).

A full understanding of the potion and its effects is lacking. It darkened the sun temporarily, and lifted after Sin took some unknown action. Taking this action may have ended the darkness.

The full text of the chant used in the rite is:

Ring around a rosie, a pocketful of posies, ashes, ashes, tenebrae!

Tenebrae! Tenebrae!

Fall!

Frigidium

A cryomancy cast spell, makes something so cold that it breaks.

A similar spell that results in a chain reaction rather than simply targeting a single location is *frigidium torquem reactionem*. It isn't clear if this is a separate spell, or just an enhanced version.

Galcies exspiravit

A cryomancy cast spell that creates an ice duplicate of any living being. Useful when trying on clothes.

Speculum verto

A cast spell to swap the locations of any two objects that can be seen.

Speculum emeragus

A cast spell used to transport a witch directly to the source of an emergency.

Amore altare

A silvery and simple potion, that when combined with a hair, creates a silvery replica of someone's current love. Often used by younger witches to test relationships, before they grow out of the mistrust.

It was thought to only be able to be used for a single individual, until Danniere de Amore utilised an enormous amount of emotional energy to break through the limit, demonstrating a combination of four individuals.

Dispelled by uttering the phrase "Amora cadere."

Amor bilem

A noxious and infectious potion, it releases a gas that forces anyone who comes in contact with it to fall in love with the individual bound to the potion.

Its ability to strip a person's self-will has made it taboo among many witches. Its use is considered allowable in war, but cruel and torturous in most other contexts.

Due to love and hatred's close relationship, some strong wills can resist it by turning the obsessive love it causes into obsessive hate, though the results of that can be messy.

Halcyon draco

An animancy potion to transform the person who drinks it into a dragon, temporarily. The particular dragon aspects, such as the kind of breath, or colour of the scales, reflects the temperament of the one who drank the potion.

Trepidatio vectio

A multi-person transportation magic.

This is a cast spell, the uses minimal rite symbology to mark the area that the victims passengers need to stay within.

Apparently viewing the process as a passenger may cause your eyeballs to explode and bleed into your brain, suggesting some sort of horror not for mortal eyes.

Yes, this is a necromancy spell.

Cryomurus

A cryomancy cast spell for creating a wall of ice. A useful defensive spell.

Apparently a young hedgewitch was once dared into licking it. Apparently it took three more witch to detach her from the cold surface.

Vectio

A basic cast transport spell for small items.

Eauq aem edder

A raw spell, this is a cast spell that makes use of the magic of the leyline without a channel, such as a wand.

It's full effect is unknown, as Hyacinth Rasputin Artur (Sin) blocked Danniere de Amore (Dan) from using it.

Adileg ongats

A raw spell, this is a cast spell that makes use of the magic of the leyline without a channel, such as a wand.

A spell to freeze an object in place by encasing it in ice.

Rite of the Three Princes

A necromantic rite of banishment, this spell can be used to remove demons temporarily from the current location.

The rite is forbidden, and not well known, as it requires calling on the True Names of three of the demons who rule over the Underworld.

This rite works even for higher level demonic entities and cursed folk, such as vampires.

However, it requires that you be on good terms with the three princes of the Underworld named in the rite.

The text of the rite is:

I am . And by Asmodeus, by Leviathon and by Belphegor, I banish you!

Privicia

A simple cast spell for creating walls around oneself, for the purpose of privacy.

Immortalis maintainent

A cast spell for suspending an object in time.

This is an animancy spell, but one that many covens from different magic skills have mastered.

Duo en unum

The first in a series of cast spells used to link two souls together.

Once complete, the two souls will resonate with each other, with several abilities. * Each soul will have limited access to the mana of the other, though this can be revoked at any moment by either soul. * Each soul will be able to feel what the other feels. * This includes depression and anxiety, making the spell dangerous. * Each soul will be able to feel the general direction of the other. * There are unconfirmed reports of witches who have been linked for a long time being able to exchange thoughts with each other. * The spell is permanent and cannot be undone without significant effort.

Coques bulla

Simple cast spell to create boiling water.

Mulligis atrop

A raw spell, this is a cast spell that makes use of the magic of the leyline without a channel, such as a wand.

This spell is used to seal doorways, portals, and holes in reality.

Muluiceps aperta

A raw spell, this is a cast spell that makes use of the magic of the leyline without a channel, such as a wand.

This is a spell to turn a reflective surface into a remote viewing mirror.

Muinmos mutirtnoc

A raw spell, this is a cast spell that makes use of the magic of the leyline without a channel, such as a wand.

This spell breaks many illusions and allows a witch to free a mind from being compelled.

Rite of Royalty

A rite that can only be invoked by the true heir of Artur. It causes all knights of the Round Table, past and present, to appear to protect and acknowledge the heir as King of Caerlorne.

Gather, gather, rise and remember. By the Charter, by the holy soil of the shining city, I call you forth to fulfil the contract. Knights of the Table, acknowledge your King.

Ereclu siugnas

A raw spell, this is a cast spell that makes use of the magic of the leyline without a channel, such as a wand.

This spell boils blood of anything within eyesight of the caster. Spells like these give witches a bad name.

Conligo minusmeam

A cast spell invented by Chloe.

Unlike most binding spells, this one is designed exclusively to work on undead who no longer possess a soul.

Detineo restituo

A cast spell invented by Sin.

It appears to be able to restore broken tekmancy artefacts, at a decreased capability level.

Crescere flos

A simple cast animancy spell for growing a flower from a seed.

Ut orbis terrarum

An animancy cast spell that temporarily binds the magic of a person, removing their ability to use magic at all.

It is extremely painful and disorienting.

Knowledge of it's existence is widespread, but knowledge of the actual words used to cast it, let alone the other processes, is forbidden to all but the highest level animancy witches.

Vitae summa

An auramancy cast spell for lessening the weight of emotions. Had terrible side-effects, including excessive vomiting and diarrhea.

Dormio

A simple cast sleep spell. Generally only effective for a few seconds at a time, unless enormous amounts of magic are put into the spell.

Assemblis

A difficult cast tekmancy spell to activate a series of tekmancy artefacts in a given area. The larger the area, the more difficult it is to cast.

Fulmen ignem

A cast pyromancy spell. It generates a small, but very fast and very accurate fireball that is known to be lethal in many cases.

Spells like these are usually reserved for war, and use outside the battlefield is taboo.

Rima fissura

A cast spell to crack something apart.

Most often used to assist in mining operations.

Fatigatio ruina

A cast animancy spell to make someone exhausted. Usually made use of bullies at the early years of the academies.

The Demon Wizard of Drek

A play, apparently revolving around an evil Wizard, as many plays do. (Wizards being only a myth, have taken on a horror aspect to them, like the monsters that frighten children).

The Wizard is apparently “a serial killer wrapped inside a hero”.

The play is a tragedy.

Script

Narrator: This is a tale, dear friends, from sombre times. A time when magic was feared, when those born with it were called cursed. A time when even mothers would kill their beloved children, to spare them the pain of being called... Sorceress.

Direction: Fade, revealing woman with child

Woman: Oh child of mine, I must take from you this life, but I cannot. What crime against the stars have I committed that such a choice is mine, and mine alone? It cannot be, this curse, am I to blame?

Enter Left: 3 witches

First witch: Give me the child, and I promise I shall make them great and terrible. All will fear their wrath.

Second witch: No! Give me the child, and I promise I shall bestow great kindness upon you and every descendant. Your line will never falter.

Third witch: No! Give me the child, and I promise to teach them how to have a gentle heart.

Woman: Such a choice is impossible. I will only give you my child, if all three of you will raise them.

Narrator: The cunning of this mother was admirable, and true. Yet she could not know the course of human history that she had set.

Clear the scene

Narrator: Far away, in the wilds and wastes, the young child grew under the tutelage of her three new mothers. She never knew the one who gave birth to her, or gifted her with power untold.

Child: One day, I want to be king of the entire world!

The Underworld

The Underworld is a nether realm, loosely connected with our own. Magics that call upon the Underworld are generally considered to be necromantic in their origin.

The Underworld houses innumerable demonic entities, cursed folk, and various others who have stumbled their way in and managed to survive.

Generally speaking, a trip to the Underworld is considered one-way. However, certain spells may allow you to use it as a cheat to reduce the distance between two locations. If the denizens grant you passage, then you can pass through the Underworld in the blink of an eye.

Disrespectful necromancers and would-be alchemists have been known to disappear whilst trying to use the Underworld as a passageway.

The Underworld is, perhaps, ruled over by six princes, and a king. The role of king is hotly debated among scholars, as is who is king. Most sources are divided.

The True Names of the seven demonic entities are not commonly known outside necromantic circles, but for those that know them, they know that calling a demon with the True Name also requires that the demon is interested in letting you live.