

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



**ZANDRAVANDRA  
LIGHT NOVEL**

**BY ALEX ZANDRA VAN CHESTEIN**

AZ18

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

**Absolutely no catch.**

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

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

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

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

—Alex Zandra

**@zandravandra  
patreon.com/zandravandra  
zandravandra.com**



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

by Alex Zandra Van Chestein

(Demo Version)

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Written and illustrated by Alex Zandra Van Chestein  
Edited by Robin Billadeau  
Additional story help by Aura Triolo & Amber Wolfer



# The Interview

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mm," M gently replied.

# The Contract

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

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

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

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

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

*Meowwww.*

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

*Meowwwwww!!!*

But the cat was having none of it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Clack!*

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

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

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

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

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

"So every witch needs one," M said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

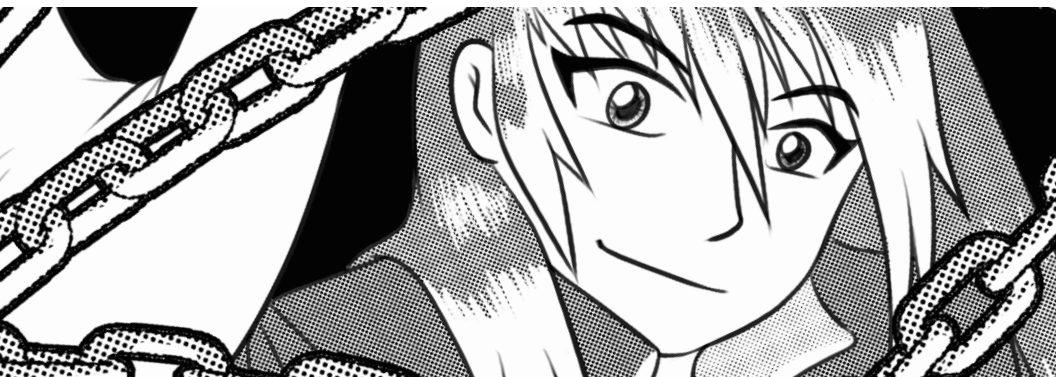
M struggled to parse the words on the page, his head a jumble of thoughts. "This, uh," he said, "this is moving really fast. You're just, like... sure I'm the right person for this? Shouldn't there be an interview?"

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

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

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

And he'd be able to do magic.



## And That's It For Now

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