

RENA AND PENELOPE

by

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"My God," Rena said, crinkling her nose as she peered over the edge of the bubbling cauldron, watching the mucousy bubbles burst and belch out noxious fumes.

"Don't worry, dear. If I burn it, we can just order pizza," Penelope said, grinning as she stirred. To Rena's eyes, her cheerful disposition looked sinister thanks to the underlighting from the flame under the cauldron.

No, maybe that grin is just a little bit sinister, Rena thought.

"I meant that literally," Rena said, pulling an amulet out of her pocket and clasping it over her heart. "Protections be upon us."

"We're gonna be fine, love," Penelope said, her grin softening to a smile. "Demons stay dead when I kill them."

"Are you sure?" Rena said. "Because just last week, I thought I had killed one and I was getting ready to perform the banishment rites when he leapt up and tried to eviscerate me."

"His mistake," Penelope said. "Should've gone quietly. Much less painful. But yes, I'm very sure. I've cut her off from the energy of her conclave. And if Ith'Kaya here isn't dead, she's doing a very good job of faking it as I cook her down to her essence."

"You know her *name!*?" Rena said.

"She introduced herself," Penelope said with a shrug, using her stirring stick to poke at a horn peeking out of the mixture. "What was I supposed to do?"

"Penny," Rena said, her voice carefully measured. "This can't be legal."

"What kind of law could there possibly be about this?" Penelope said. "Demons aren't exactly beloved, right? Besides, she attacked me first! I'm just... taking full advantage of that."

"OK, well, using demonic essence definitely isn't morally acceptable," Rena said.

"So I'm just supposed to throw it away? Wasteful, Rena," Penelope said, her grin returning. "Any more objections?"

"I hate it, OK!?" Rena said. "I hate that you have this... this *crap* in our living room, stinking up the place again! It's bad enough when it's just weird herbs or whatever, but *demon remains*?"

Penelope's grin retreated. Neither of them said anything for a moment; Penelope resumed her stirring as Rena took a number of steadying breaths.

Rena had surprised herself with her outburst. True, she hated this. But she also hated arguments, and they hardly ever had them. They could usually talk their conflicts out calmly, or leave enough hints that the other would pick up on it, apologizing profusely when they realized they were being an annoyance.

But this was different. For the past few weeks, Penelope had been working on potions of increasing stinkitude, going from almost pleasant to, well, this. Anywhere Rena went in the apartment (and there weren't many options there; not much rent money in freelance demon-hunting for either of them), she couldn't avoid that horrific smell.

Worse than that, though, she couldn't shake the feeling that there was more going on here. That Penelope was ashamed of something, which was out of character for her. Rena needed more information, and this was the only way she was going to get it.

"I'm sorry," Penelope said. "I really am. I know that this, literally, stinks. But I need to do this. The opportunity presented itself, so I took it."

"You *need* to do this, love?" Rena said, trying to soften her tone. "What do you need demonic essence for?"

"A potion," Penelope said.

"I guessed that," Rena said. "What kind of potion, Penny?"

"A potion to... transform someone," Penelope said, her eyes fixed on the bubbling mixture.

"Who?"

Penelope took a deep breath, setting her stirring stick against the rim and taking her girlfriend's hands in her own. "Rena, do you remember when we first met?"

"Of course," Rena said. She felt Penelope's hands tremble, a noted departure from her usual calm and collected demeanor. "It was almost eight months ago, at that demon hunters' convention. I was in line for some panel about leveraging your social media engagements to enhance your marketplace footprint or whatever shlock they were peddling, and you came up and asked if I was there alone. I was, so you asked if I could wait in line with you. After talking with you for five minutes, we skipped the panel and grabbed lunch together instead."

"Yeah, that's right," Penelope said. "Listen, I wasn't... I *haven't* been totally honest with you. You asked if I was there for any particular reason, and I said I was looking for new demon-hunting gear," Penelope said.

"Yeah," Rena said. "And what was the real reason?"

Rena felt Penelope squeeze her hands, steadying herself for what she had to say. "I was sent to find a demon hunter to offer up to my demon conclave," Penelope said.

Rena gave half a second to hope it was a joke, but she knew Penelope wouldn't joke about this. Failing that, she offered one of

her own. "Well, you're certainly taking your sweet time pulling me in," Rena said.

Penelope smiled. "I'm obviously not doing that anymore. But that's what I was sent there to do. I was told to find the most powerful hunter there; I wanted to find the cutest one. Luckily, I found both."

"You can hold the flattery until we're done with this conversation, even though it's completely accurate," Rena said. "Why were you working for a demon conclave?"

"Yeeeah, that's the thing," Penelope said, releasing Rena's hands and taking two steps back. "I, uh..."

Rena watched as her girlfriend's face morphed into something hellish and haunting, with pulsing red eyes and a pair of horns poking out of her forehead; her fingers fused together and formed menacing claws; her back burst with a flurry of putrid feathers as a gnarled pair of wings tore through her shirt, framing her newly-revealed form.

Penelope was a demon. The kind Rena — and Penelope, for that matter — had killed dozens, if not hundreds, of times. Penelope stood there, looking at Rena, those utterly inhuman eyes staring back at her.

Honestly, though? Rena thought to herself. *Still really cute.*

"I haven't been totally lying to you," Penelope said, her voice raspy and lower, but still hers. "The version of me you know isn't a trick. My parents came here, took on human forms, and had me. ...And then abandoned me, but that's another story. I can change between this form and the one you know. They're both *me*. I'm a demon either way, though, and I think this one's more illustrative."

"...So when I asked if there was anything important about you I needed to know..." Rena said.

"Yeah, I should've been more specific when I said 'I have a bit of a grumpy side you might not like,'" Penelope said.

"But you use holy symbols," Rena said. "And I know I've seen you dip your hands in holy water without dissolving."

"It stings me a bit, but not too bad," Penelope said. "As I hope you'd guess, I'm not a very evil demon. I think that makes it hurt me less. But I'm still born of hellfire and such."

"Can you... Do you think you could change back, please?" Rena said.

"I'd rather not," Penelope said. "I want you to see exactly what this version of me looks like. There's already enough confusion involved; I want this part to be crystal clear."

"Well... You're not trying to kill me, right?" Rena said.

"Not anymore, and never again," Penelope said. "That doesn't mean I wasn't terrified to reveal this part of myself to you, though."

"I think I know that feeling," Rena said. "That fear of showing somebody your true self. I... I felt the same way with my parents."

"Yeah, I can see that," Penelope said. "And I wish you didn't have to put up with that. I mean, if your powers only manifest for the women in your family, and you have those powers, then I'd think they wouldn't have any argument, but..."

"Bigotry has never responded well to logic," Rena said, a tired smile on her face. "I learned that lesson a long time ago. Not exactly a one-to-one correlation here, but I haven't forgotten it, love."

"I should've known you'd get it," Penelope said. "I just... I couldn't tell you. I was too scared you wouldn't understand."

"Don't worry," Rena said, relieved. "I understand perfectly. You need to make the potion so you can transform into a full-fledged human instead of a half-human, half-demon."

Penelope sighed. "OK, so you get part of it," she said.

"What do I not get?" Rena said.

"I'm not a half-human, half-demon," Penelope said. "I'm fully demon. That's very hard to change. Impossible, probably."

"So why do you need the potion, then?" Rena said, looking over at the pot of stinking, hiccuping sludge.

Penelope took a long time before answering. "Do you remember our first date, love?" she asked at last.

"...I guess we're not counting the convention hall?"

"Lukewarm chicken fingers on styrofoam plates aren't date food," Penelope said.

"Snob," Rena said, smiling. She was still thrown by Penelope's appearance, but it was definitely her.

"It was that Italian place off 380," Penelope said. "The date was great, but what I'm talking about... When we were leaving, as I walked you to your car, do you remember what you said?"

"I said..." Rena said, raking her memory. "Ah, of course. I said, 'If you're going my way, I'd be more than happy to take you.'"

Penelope nodded. "Up to that point, I wasn't sure if I was going to turn you over or not. After that, I knew I wouldn't."

"It took you that long!?"

"You know how demon biology works," Penelope said. "We... That is, I live by my conclave's energy. I can only survive without it for about a day or two. When the more powerful members have desires, I need to fulfill them so they'll keep me alive. You were my mission. To reject that mission without another conclave ready to take me in is a huge risk.

"And since I told them last night that they can go bathe in holy water, this is pretty important right now."

"You... You're cut off?" Rena said. "You're gonna die, then! Why would you do that, Penelope?"

"Because they said I had to either turn you over or get kicked out," Penelope said. "They gave me a deadline, and I missed it. Ith'Kaya was here to collect you instead, and I couldn't have that."

"I can't believe you would choose me over them," Rena said.

"It wasn't a choice, Rena," Penelope said. "They wanted my power. You want *me*."

Rena smiled, remembering every reason why she loved Penelope. "But what happens now? Why can't you can't just

transform yourself? If not to a human, maybe a fairy or something less, well, evil?"

"I've tried," Penelope said, stirring the cauldron. "That's what the experiments these last few weeks have been. My demonic blood rejects every transformation I can find. I'm stuck like this."

"Well, the offer still stands," Rena said. "If you're going my way, I'd be more than happy to take you. But I'm not sure what good that's going to do at this point. What's the plan?"

"I need to find a demon that would be OK with me refusing to kill people," Penelope said. "Just one would be enough. But that'd be quite a find in my social circles, which is why I need to get creative."

"There aren't any friendly demons?" Rena said. "I mean, you're nice to me. Why can't the more powerful demons just get their energy from doing good things? Or, at least, non-evil things?"

"They probably could," Penelope said. "But I've never met another demon like me. Folks who are either born into or willing to infiltrate demon society don't tend to have that moral leaning."

"I think it'd be a worthy experiment," Rena said.

Penelope took a steadying breath. "I'm glad you think so," she said. "Are you willing to put it to the test?"

Rena stared at her. "...Are you serious?"

"Completely," Penelope said. "That's my plan."

"Penny," Rena said. "You... You want me to become a demon!?"

"I don't *want* that," Penelope said. "I didn't wake up this morning thinking, 'Gosh, I really hope Rena turns into a demon today! That'd sure be swell!' I want you to stay how you are. The strongest, kindest, most wonderful human I know or can imagine. But since it's the only way I can stay with you... Yeah. Yeah, I want you to become a demon. We'd form our own two-person conclave, giving each other the energy we need. It wouldn't be luxurious, but

we'd both live without relying on conniving, murderous villains for our lifeforce. Would you do this for me?"

Rena staggered back a few steps, reeling from this request. "I... I'm a demon hunter, though. I hunt demons. That's what I do! If I did this, I'd be..."

"I hunt demons too," Penelope said. "If I can do it, then you could do it. You'd be in exactly the same situation you're in right now. You'll still be outside the mainstream demon-hunting circles taking dubious, risky jobs, and your family's still gonna hate you."

"Oh, no," Rena said. "That's a step too far, Penny. My family and I don't get along all the time, but they still love me."

"Do they?" Penelope said. "Because they didn't answer my calls when that evil spirit tried to possess you and I spent twelve hours exorcising it. They weren't there when I took you to the hospital after you fell thirty feet during that job on the construction site with the werewolf working the night shift. Hell, your only GoFundMe contributions for the medical bills were me seeding the pot and Ash from our D&D group!"

Rena didn't say anything for a moment. Finally, she offered, "...Ash is hella tight."

"Ash is hella tight," Penelope said. "And they thought this was a good plan."

"You talked with Ash about this, but not me?" Rena said.

"I've been planning this for a long time, Rena," Penelope said. "Since before we met, actually. Apart from you, Ash is the only person I trust. I thought they could give an honest appraisal. They had a similar reaction to yours at first, but they ultimately said that it was up to you. And that's my position, too."

Rena chewed the inside of her cheeks, turning this whole scenario over in her head. "...Could you turn Ash into a demon? I'm afraid my powers will reject the transformation."

"They were willing to do it in an emergency, yeah," Penelope said. "But I want you first, Rena. You're all I need."

"Who'd be the more powerful one in our conclave?" Rena said. "Who would call the shots?"

"Honestly, probably you, but I'm not sure," Penelope said. "I don't know if it's based on seniority or strength. Demon hierarchies are pretty opaque. You know I wouldn't abuse that power, though."

Do I? Rena asked herself. Yes, I do. She's had plenty of chances to take advantage of me and never has.

Rena could feel her pulse pounding in her ears. "I... What's it like, being a demon?" she said.

"I don't know what it's like not being one," Penelope said. "I wish I could help you know that before you make the jump, but I can't. My body, my heart, my mind, my... whatever I have that can be called a soul, that's all real. I think you know that. It's not a false life. It might be a cursed life. But I know it's better when I'm with you. It's amazing when I'm with you. It's a life worth living."

Rena watched Penelope for a moment. Her usual swagger was stripped away; all that was left was the woman she loved, pleading for Rena to help her out.

To save her life.

And it was at that exact moment that Rena realized how foolish she was.

"Oh, Penny," Rena said, wrapping her girlfriend in a tight embrace — claws, wings, and all. "I'm garbage — An absolute, irredeemable pile of trash for considering not helping you for even a second."

"You're not!" Penelope said, careful to not jab Rena as she hugged her. "You are, at worst, a quite lovely pile of trash."

Rena laughed, now realizing that tears were pouring down her face. "Do you remember what you said?" she said. "After I said my cheesy line?"

"Probably something even cheesier," Penelope said, now gingerly holding Rena's shoulders and looking her in the eyes. "Yeah, I remember. But I want you to tell me."

"Well, it's the same thing I want to tell you, so it works out," Rena said. "'Wherever you're going, I want to go there with you.'"

Penelope grinned a gnarled, fanged grin. "I was right, huh?" she said. "That's absolute cheese."

"Worked on me, though," Rena said. "Then and now. Give me the potion, Penny. I want to stay with you forever, or as close to that as we can get. I love you."

"I love you too," Penelope said, kissing her. Then, turning to the cauldron and grabbing a ladle, she asked, "Ready?"

"I am," Rena said. She watched as Penelope lifted the ladle from the belching liquid, slopping its contents into a glass.

"One more ingredient," Penelope said, running her claws through her hair, still the same brilliant shade of red she had in her human form. After a few tries, she held a strand of hair before her eyes and lowered it into the glass, watching it disappear with a sinister sizzle as it made contact.

"Bottoms up, love," Penelope said, handing Rena the glass. "And then maybe we can get that pizza."

Rena held it up in front of her.

It looked what you'd scrape off your shoes after walking through a pile of week-old buffet leftovers dropped in a mudfield in the middle of summer.

It smelled like a thousand years' worth of sewage had mingled together with her dad's cologne.

But then she looked at Penelope, and she knew it wasn't even a question.

She took a deep breath, raised the glass to her lips, and drank. It was the best decision she'd ever made.

THE END