

Magic Midterms

By: EL_Refresho

Penny waved to the tennis team on her way into the school. Alex waved back, and she wanted nothing more than to run to him and run her fingers through the curly brown forest of his hair. He stood almost a foot taller than her, and that made her all the more excited because it meant she would have to stand on her tiptoes to kiss him. Penny beamed at him, and decided then and there that today would be a great day.

But she regretfully turned back to the school entryway and went inside, making sure her short blonde hair bounced as she did. Penny had come in the side entrance between the cafeteria and auditorium. It was a wide entryway already filling with students before classes began. Newly built and still fresh with splendor, the floors were shiny and tan walls clean. She passed the double doors to the cafeteria, and ignored them, walking instead to the area around the vending machines where the cheerleading squad traditionally would gather.

Along the way, Penny passed by a pair of girls, one of whom she had seen since grade school, but never paid attention to. The other seemed familiar, but Penny had no recollection of her. They stood next to a side door that led to the backstage areas of the auditorium, where the band and theater kids practiced. Unlike most students at the High School, this pair was unafraid of looking Penny right in the eyes. One of them made a little wave. She was about Penny's height with long black hair, and the cheerleader realized she had not seen this girl before.

Still, Penny smiled back, a part of her relieved someone looked beyond her letterman jacket and at her. After five years of being in the cool girls clique, Penny had grown tired of keeping up a mean facade to everyone Not Cool. After all, she was almost out of her Junior year, and could feel the end of high school.

The second girl of the pair, a pixie with short brunette hair colored with blue and violet highlights, motioned for Penny to come over. A year ago, the cheerleader wouldn't have noticed, but today she didn't care much for appearances and walked over.

The pixie smiled, "Hey, you're in my world history class, aren't you?"

Penny had to think about it, but then replied, "Oh, yeah. You did that presentation on the Parthenon, right? That was actually really cool."

The pixie paused, her eyebrows raised in surprise. "You. . . remember that?"

"Of course," Penny said, "the model you made was amazing," she said, hoping to get by the fact that she didn't know the pixie's name.

The other girl, the one with the long witchy hair, stepped between the pixie and Penny, "Could you help us? We just need another hand to move some things around in the theater room." She pointed to the doors to the backstage classrooms.

The cheerleader shrugged, "I've got nothing else to do."

The pixie and the witch smiled and led the way into a smaller, quieter hall. Penny felt the cellphone in her back pocket buzz, and she looked at it to see that Marissa, a fellow cheerleader, and one who was already at school, had texted her: "what r u doing?" It was a good question, and Penny didn't have a great answer. So she ignored Marissa.

She followed the pair into a classroom split in two: one side filled by ordinary school desks and a blackboard, and the other half an open area for actors to perform and rehearse. Cubby holes filled with props and clothes lined an entire wall, while a pair of clothes racks sat along the opposite wall. Penny paused, and

wondered exactly what the girls needed help moving around as the trio walked to the middle of the rehearsal area. The pixie looked a little blanché, despite encouraging motions by the witch.

"Wink, just do it!" The witch said.

The shorter girl sighed and turned to Penny. Then she stamped her foot and her entire body sparkled. Her face and her clothes evaporated into light and nothingness. When Penny looked again, she saw an honest to goodness pixie. The girl wasn't any shorter, but her purple eyes were brighter, her nose pointed, and sharp ears poking out from behind violet hair. The pixie wore a flighty sky blue dress and a worn brown pouch with hand sketched designs on her hip.

"Sorry about this." Wink said with a grimace, and threw a pinch of what could only be pixie dust at Penny.

The cheerleader coughed and blew the sparkling dust away. "What the hell?" Penny said, feeling very strange very suddenly. She felt floaty and detached, as if her limbs were lighter or not so under her control. She shook her head quickly, but that only made her dizzy. "Was that some kind of drug?" The cheerleader fell into a desk, suddenly too tired to hold herself up.

"Look, it's just a project. I thought you were like the rest of the cheer team." The pixie's face was worried. So that made both of them unhappy about the situation.

"Get on with it, Wink." The witch said, now sitting down to face Penny, a pen and pad in her hand. The cheerleader looked and saw an entirely different person. She was older, well into her forties, but well taken care of, and wearing a long and loose black dress.

"Sorry, Morrigan." The pixie said, and turned to Penny. "Don't worry," She said with a hopeful smile.

Penny didn't respond. Wink made a gesture with her hands, and an unseen force lifted the cheerleader out of the desk and left to hang on imaginary hooks in the air, where no part of her body could touch the ground. Penny could move, but her arms and legs were surprisingly taught, as if they dangled from strings.

"Interesting." The witch commented, scribbling a note in her pad.

Wink sighed and put her full focus on Penny. She moved both hands and released sparkling dust into the air around her. It didn't fall to the ground, but instead spiraled around and through Penny.

"Teaghráin a bhogadh; teaghráin le rince; teaghráin go beo." Wink said, and the dust coalesced into four thin strings that rose from Penny's wrists and ankles. They attached to a wooden handle that materialized above her the cheerleader.

"Wink, I don't get it." Penny said, trying to keep her head up right. "What are you doing to me?"

"I'm changing you. Into something fun!" She said, eyes too large and too wild. "Just, trust me, OK?"

"Why?" Penny asked, finally giving in to gravity and letting her head loll onto her shoulder. It was so heavy. Everything was so heavy. The pixie responded with a magical motion that pulled Penny's head upright.

"I'll . . . make it up to you, I promise." Wink said, looking at her instructor, "I'll arrange a date between you and Alex."

"How do --" Wink gestured and Penny's mouth closed up. The fairy began to move in slow motion, sending another stream of pixie dust to the cheerleader.

"Láidir i gcuimhne, bog i gcroí, láidir i m'anam, bog i bhfoirm."

Penny suddenly exhaled, pushing every ounce of air from her body, and seeming more. She thought her skin started to squeeze in on her bones. And just before she had breathed herself into pure air, she inhaled more fully than she ever had. Her entire body filled with pockets of air. Every part of Penny seemed more soft and round. Wink snuck a glance to the witch Morrigan, who nodded in approval, then turned back to her project and shook out her hands.

This time, Wink closed her eyes as she incanted: "Craiceann i éadach. fola i . . ."

The squeaky classroom door opened, drawing two sets of eyes across the room. Penny tried, but failed, to move her head, but it no longer obeyed her.

"What the hell?!" Marissa shouted.

Morrigan didn't waste time and she manifested in her hand. Without speaking, the witch unleashed weirding energies at the intruding cheerleader. Penny didn't see what happened, and Marissa didn't have time to yell. Morrigan waved her wand and a human sized toy flew from where Marissa would have been, landing sloppily between the witch and the pixie.

Marissa was a doll. There was something in the pitch of the dolls cheeks and color in her stitched eyes that made that clear. And she wasn't just a doll; she was a cat who had just walked off a Broadway stage. Almost pure white with a mane of puffy hair, she had hand drawn fur on her thighs and belly, and a long kitty tail laying behind her. Soft looking arm and leg warmers made the plush toy even more inviting and huggable. She sat upright for just a moment before flopping to the side.

Wink looked at the plushie with her jaw hanging open. "That was amazing," She said.

Amazing was not the word Penny would have used. Morrigan looked at the cat toy and shrugged. The awe of the moment, however, wore off, and pain rippled through Penny's strange new body. It came from every part of her, jagged and uneven. It hurt just to be. Penny's mouth opened and sweat beaded down the right half of her body. She started to yell, but Morrigan's quick wand brought the pain to an end.

The witch motioned to Penny: "Worry about your toy," she said.

The pixie nodded and ran to the cheerleader, her forehead creasing in worry. She bit her lip.

"No, no, no." She started shaking her head, "The spell was only half done." Wink whispered. Her eyes and hands were frantic, "I don't know how to fix this."

Penny straightened herself as best as her strings and heavy body let her to look at Wink. She was half toy and half human, and the pixie changing her was rapidly losing faith. Her deadened pain began to turn to dreaded fear.

"You can fix me, Wink," She said, her voice quiet, "I believe in you."

The pixie's head snapped up to Penny. "You do? Even after I . . ." she let her sentence hang in the air.

"You already made me half a toy. You can fix me."

A light sparked in Wink's eyes. "I know what to do." She ran back to the costume racks, revealing butterfly wings to Penny, almost the same blues and violets that she wore.

Wink leafed through the clothes like book pages, without ever touching them, and two costumes caught her eye. She picked them off the hangers with her own hands and walked them to Penny. The first was a nude catsuit with thick fabric. Wink used a pinch of dust and wood grain lines emerged across the suit.

"Comhlacht agus éadach a bheith mar cheann." There were no fancy gestures or sparkly lights this time. The catsuit disappeared from Wink's hand and reappeared hugging Penny's body, beneath all her clothes. The dull pain faded into memory and Penny felt complete once again. From cloth to string to wood, she was a doll.

"You turned me into a marionette!" She shouted.

Wink was confused, "Um, you told me to fix you."

"I thought you were going to make me human again!" Penny said.

Wink laughed louder than she should have been able to, "You're more adorable this way!" When Penny grumbled, the pixie added, "Do you believe me when I say I mean you no harm?"

Penny fitzed, wobbling her wooden limbs as best she could manage. "Yes," She finally admitted.

Once again, the pixie's eyes lit up. "OK. This is almost over, I promise." Wink stamped her foot, just as she had in the distant past when Penny was still human. Except, where Wink revealed that she was a fairy, Penny revealed that she was a doll. She didn't have toes anymore, her fingers had only half as many joints as they should, and her skin had become the wood grain patterned suit. She was soft, but with wooden bones inside, and four white strings that now controlled her life.

The pixie stepped forward and kissed Penny on each cheek, leaving a film of pixie dust and a tingling warmth. New thoughts and new emotions bubbled up into Penny's mind. She wanted to jump and dance and

flip. She didn't care so much about what she needed to do to get that new dress. And most of all, she wanted someone with her who would grab her handle and make her come to life. If this was what being a doll was about, she may not mind it so much.

Wink admired Penny for a moment, then picked up the second costume. It was a lederhosen set with a red vest and green pointed hat. And, worst of all were the cartoon gloves and oversized stuffed shoes. Which together would reduce Penny to pure cuteness.

"Oh, please no," Penny tried to convince the fairy against the outfit, but when had she gotten her way? The pixie took one last wave of her hand and the clothes melted onto Penny's body. There was nothing left to mark her human self.

The pixie turned to Morrigan and put Penny on full display. "This is Penny-ochio," she said proudly.

The witch finished her note taking. "Well done, Wink. This is some of the best transformation work I've seen from a student in a long time, spell interruption excluded. A+."

The pixie whooped twirled in the air on her butterfly wings. When she came back down, she wrapped her arms around Penny and squeezed her stuffed body down to her wooden bones.

"Thanks for believing in me." She whispered so only the toy could hear. For some reason, a sense of pride flowed through Penny.

"As for you, kitty." Morrigan said, turning to Marissa. The witch had already donned her student disguise. Her voice drew all three sets of eyes to the cat plush. Morrigan waved her wand and the frizzy brunette was human again, dressed in her cheer uniform, sneakers, and a tight white kitty collar. "What did you see here when you walked through that door?"

Marissa looked from Penny to Wink to the witch. "I saw, um, my friend turned into a toy." She said timidly. All at once, her plush cat body returned. She looked at her paws and tail in amazement, and then up to

the witch, some kind of understanding dawning. "I didn't see anything. Just an empty room." Her human self reappeared just as quickly as it had disappeared.

"Good kitten." Morrigan motioned for the cheerleader to get up, and they left the room, leaving Wink and her new toy alone.

Penny looked at the pixie expectantly, and after a few seconds, finally coughed. "Aren't you going to turn me back."

"Weeeell, because of the way I fixed you, it's going to take a little while before I can."

"How long?" Penny straightened up, trying to do as much as her strings would allow.

Wink shrugged, "Just a few days," she said, "like, three, specifically."

"Three days? What am I going to do like this for three days!"

Wink gave a sly smile that worried the marionette's knots.

Penny watched, giddy and terrified and hopeful, as students filed into the theater room. Most of them noticed her, but had more important things to deal with than a life sized puppet, and instead went over homework or chatted. The class was informal, and they chose to sit on the ground in a large circle rather than desks. Penny dangled nearby on her marionette stand in the corner. And then her plush heart leaped when a tall brown haired tennis boy walked into the room.

Alex took a curious glance to the doll; more curious than anyone else so far. He would know. Her hair was the same. Her face was the same. Surely he, of everyone, would recognize her. But he would see that she was just a toy. He would laugh and never go out with her. And it was all Wink's fault. Penny subtly shifted her gaze elsewhere, until he walked up to her and ran curious fingers through her hair. Penny dared not move, for fear he would see even the small movements she had left to her own power.

Something moved behind Alex. Something invisible but for a small shimmer of blue and violet, and silent but for a whisper: "Now kiss!"

He fell forward into her, warm lips locking onto a soft mouth. And he lingered for a moment longer than she thought he would. When Alex pulled away, they both stared at the other. Penny's mouth hung open. Neither of them paid attention to the hollering and clapping of the rest of the class.

"Penny?" He whispered, believing and not believing at the same time. He didn't laugh. He knew and he didn't laugh. The marionette smiled and winked. She had been right. Today would be a great day.

Epilogue

Marissa breathed in deeply and then exhaled the same way. Her room was dark, her bed was comfy, and her eyes were closed. But she couldn't get to sleep. Her insane, impossible, and extraordinary transformation kept floating into her mind, keeping her awake. Her hand idly reached up and played with the cat collar she still wore. It had her name on it. The collar should have been humiliating, but Marissa didn't know what would happen to her if she took it off, and was not prepared to find out at school. But at home, she didn't want to remove it.

Except it wasn't the feeling of the collar that kept Marissa awake. She snapped her eyes open and turned her lamp on with a sigh. She looked across the room to the mirror hanging on her closet, and walked to it. She wore her customary big t-shirt and short shorts in addition to her collar, but they just weren't cutting it tonight. Marissa wanted to be even more comfortable. She never stopped playing with her collar.

"This is crazy." She told her reflection, "You know this is crazy, right?" Her reflection nodded. Marissa sighed and opened her closet door and dug into the depths of her clothes to find a giant black trash bag, filled to the brim with a lifetime collection of stuffed animals and rag dolls. She heaved it out of her closet, surprised by its weight, and dumped her assorted toys out onto her bed. Teddy bears, cartoon characters, and dolls named after desserts smiled at her. Marissa smiled back, "Why does crazy seem so fun?"

The cheerleader stripped out of her minimal clothes and looked at herself once again in the mirror. "Today," she started, "I saw my friend get turned into a marionette, and . . ." the changes swept across her body before Marissa could react, and she watched intently in the mirror as they came. She had never seen any of this before. She had never seen the white catsuit become her skin. She had never seen her body soften and fill with stuffing. She had never seen thin whiskers grow from her cheeks, nor her hair stick out into a mane. And she had never seen her tail swish into existence.

Marissa brought her paws up and ran them over her plush body, thrilled by the sensation of cloth skin on cloth skin. She spun around and enjoyed the swish of her tail, stalking to her bed, amazed at how light and airy she felt; at how graceful she could be. Marissa clicked off her light and sank into a pile of her fellow toys; her best friends. She soon slept and dreamt of a place where there were other living toys like her.