

# The Fractious Familiar

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*“A familiar is such a creature, an animal or bird that sees inside to the very soul of its human companion, and knows what others might not.”*

Bronwen was going to be late for the coven, and this upset her. She felt that, as one of the oldest witches in the land, her behavior had to set an example for the younger ones to follow, so it would be unbecoming and rude of her to keep the others waiting.

It was her familiar's fault that she would be tardy. He, a buck named Raven, kept importuning her with pleas for attention, butting his horned head against the lower extremities of his mistress and bleating raucously. Raven could not speak, but was so closely in touch with her soul that Bronwen could understand the animal's demand to be taken to the meeting.

"Disruptive animals like you are not allowed at the Witches' Sabbath," Bronwen vocalized. Then, entering the simple mind of her companion, she promised: "If you behave, I'll bring you crunchy leaves and a carrot or two."

Raven resisted his mistress's entreaties. An image formed in his mind that Bronwen, after puzzling for a while, was able to interpret. "You want to fly with me!?" she asked, incredulous. "You are too heavy to be carried on my lap and everyone knows that goats can't fly."

Raven was strong willed and not so easily dissuaded. An intense emotion flowed from his mind to hers. "Teach me how to fly, then!!"

Exasperated, Bronwen shoved the familiar away and replied brusquely: "That's impossible! Now, go to your bed and wait for me! I won't be gone long!" She opened the door of her hut, dragged out her armchair, sat down, and uttered in her mind the familiar spell. In a moment, the chair took off, carrying her into the gloomy night, leaving a disconsolate Raven behind.

The objectives of the witches' meeting that evening were resistance and revenge. The country's king had ordered the extermination of all witches in his domain, and armed

soldiers were already marching through the land seeking the hideouts of the worshipers of the Enemy. The witches that were captured were killed on the spot; if there was any lingering doubt about the culpability of a suspected witch, she would be tried and, in most cases, would end up burned at the stake, to join her martyred sisters.

“We have to do something to stop the carnage!” declared one of the younger witches.

“But what?” queried another.

There was a confused babble as many women offered simultaneous suggestions. Finally, one of the older members turned to Bronwen and whispered: “What do you think we should do, sister?”

Bronwen, who had remained silent up to that point, rose from her chair, cried out for attention, and addressed the gathering: “Rulers only acknowledge their errors when truth bites them on the rear. We need to hurt the king badly so that he will learn to leave us alone!”

A witch interrupted her with a question: “Hurt him how?”

Bronwen threw her hands in the air and continued: “I will turn my familiar into a fire-spewing dragon and bring death and destruction upon the king’s palace. With luck, the oppressor will die in the attack. Death to the king!”

“Death to the king!” bellowed the entire congregation.

As the armchair flew her back home, Bronwen began harboring misgivings about the undertaking she had promised. Raven was a mild animal, though often wayward and stubborn. He might not be fierce enough as a dragon to accomplish his mission and slay the king. Worse yet, his attempt could result in his death at the hands of the king’s soldiers. If that happened, she would perish as well, since no witch can survive the death of her familiar.

She reached a wrenching decision: she would ride Raven on his quest and guide his actions. They would succeed or fail together.

Meanwhile, Raven was chagrined at being abandoned by his mistress and having his yearn to fly denied. He raced back and forth the four corners of the hut, trying to find respite from his discomfort. One of his gyrations had him stop before the table where Bronwen's open spell book rested. A vague idea took hold of him: the recipe for flying was in those papers and, if he consumed them, he might learn how to course in the skies without need for his mistress's intervention. He approached the volume and began chomping his way through its age-embrittled pages.

He was still noisily devouring the treatise when Bronwen opened the door and came in. She noticed immediately the ravaged book and the bits of paper lying on the table and the floor and hanging from Raven's beard, and realized the magnitude of the disaster. She let out a scream and, with a wave of her hand, blew the goat away towards the rear wall, into which he crashed with a bang. He remained there, whimpering.

Ignoring her familiar's distress, Bronwen picked up the remains of the book. Only a few, half devoured pages remained between the calfskin covers. The words of her spells were gone, save for those still present in her memory.

She experienced another shock when she thought of the transformation spell she would need to use to turn Raven into a fierce dragon. She had never needed to cast a dragon transformation spell, though she had used similar ones to make spoiled meat edible and turn rats and other vermin into specs of dust. Transforming a goat into a dragon might require the exertion of more power, but should be intrinsically the same process.

She summoned Raven and led him outside the hut to a nearby clearing. There, she ordered him to be still and started pronouncing the ancient words of the spell as she remembered them, while at the same time making the appropriate hand and body gestures and focusing her mind on the creature she desired to create.

She finished the spell and looked at Raven, who regarded her back curiously. He had not changed at all.

Frustrated, she tried casting the spell again, increasing somewhat the emphasis she lay on some of the most critical phrases. Again, nothing happened. Without the spell book at hand, she was hostage to her memory, which had obviously deteriorated over the

centuries. She would have to go to another witch, perhaps Orenda, and ask for help. But this would be embarrassing, so she would make one last try first.

She repeated the Assyrian words of the spell slowly, dropping them one by one, closing her eyes and making a maximum effort to concentrate on her desires: creating a dark, horrifying beast that she would ride to make battle with the king.

When she opened her eyes, Raven was gone. The large black goat she had raised since he was a kid had disappeared and there was no dragon in his place. Bronwen let out a desperate cry and dropped to the ground, expecting to die any moment, victim of the miscast spell that had also slayed her closest friend and companion.

A few moments passed. Then, Bronwen heard a persistent buzzing overhead. She looked up and, circling above her head, flew a large black moth, flopping its dark wings vigorously. Her mind made contact with that of the tiny insect and Raven's consciousness melded with hers.

There had been a change, though. Raven now exuded joy, as he flew deliriously back and forth, letting himself at times be carried by the night air. Her familiar no longer felt like a goat and seemed to be enjoying his new condition better than his former life.

Could Bronwen attempt again to transform Raven into the dragon she wanted, or try to return him to his original shape? She did not know whether it was right, or even possible, to accomplish either transformation. If she tried and failed, she might kill them both. She could no longer rely on him to behave as a fierce dragon and, if Raven returned to his former life as a goat, he might resent Bronwen for taking his new freedom away.

Bronwen sighed and returned to the hut. She would visit Orenda tomorrow and the two of them might be able to come up with a new plan for dealing with the king. For the moment, she felt that respecting the feelings and desires of a lower creature, even one as humble as a moth, was an important aspect of her mission in life. Casting spells must sometimes yield when other matters need to take precedence.

Born in Cuba, **Matias Travieso-Diaz** migrated to the United States as a young man to escape political persecution. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. About ninety of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. Some of his unpublished works have also received "honorable mentions" from several paying publications. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" has recently been released and is available on Amazon and other book outlets.

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