

## **The First Two Pages of “Pyewackett” by KM Rockwood**

From *Chesapeake Crimes: Magic Is Murder*

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An Essay by KM Rockwood

The submissions call was for an anthology to be titled *Magic is Murder*.

As the title suggested, the stories were to be crime stories (most likely involving some form of homicide) with at least a touch of magic.

What fun! I started pondering possibilities.

A character came immediately to mind and insisted that he was appropriate and had a story to be told.

A cat. A cat who's a witch's familiar.

I sat down to work on it. The blank computer screen stared at me, challenging me to come up with a starting strategy.

This was a short story, destined to be no more than ten pages long. Every page, every word, would have to count.

The first two pages would have to both establish the basis for the story and provide substantial structure for the entire thing. It needed to be done in a presentation that would intrigue readers and encourage readers to continue reading, not bore them to tears.

What needed to be included?

If the protagonist was to be a cat, that should be demonstrated immediately but not directly. As would the cat's magic qualities and relationship to his mistress. To be true to the anthology's theme of murder, we would have to have a premise that would lead to homicide.

Identifying the timeframe—a modern period when magic and witches were not persecuted, but their very existence was viewed with skepticism—was important.

The cat would be named “Pyewackett.” Familiar spirits with that name were known at least as far back as 1647, when a popular pamphlet named *The Discovery of Witches* contained a wood cut front piece that included Pyewackett as one of the familiars, although that Pyewackett was presented as an imp, not a cat. The reference has been picked up in popular culture in works like the movie *Bell Book and Candle*, which did feature Pyewackett as a cat. I hoped the name, which was also used as the title of the story, would be a shortcut to setting up reader expectations.

As all familiars, Pyewackett would be devoted to the well-being of his hapless witch, who was herself unaware of her magical powers. She would be called Zarya, after a Greek priestess of water and protector of warriors.

Her beloved, who did not share her feelings, was a soldier, coming back on leave from deployment. She was setting herself up for a broken heart.

How to present all this so it made sense but didn't turn into a tedious information dump?

Back-and-forth dialogue was a distinct possibility.

What if Pyewackett, striving to serve his mistress, decided to obtain a love potion—a risky love potion, capable of killing if it were to be used improperly—to administer to the reluctant soldier.

A conversation with the vender of charms and potions could cover the concepts that needed to be introduced.

Unless the vendor was a reasonably developed character, readers might find the conversation so dull that their eyes glazed over instead of picking up the details that made the story work. If they continued to read at all.

That presented a problem. A short story cannot afford to have many characters. My rule of thumb is to never introduce a substantial character who does not have a continuing part in a story. As I envisioned it, the only time this vendor appears would be in the very beginning.

A good part of having rules is knowing when to break them. Perhaps, in the interest of setting the tone and the scene, this was one of the times to suspend a rule.

As I worked with the story, with Pyewackett himself critically watching over my shoulder, I went that route. I placed Pyewackett on a barrel in front of the counter of a dimly lit shop, explaining his mission and negotiating for the love potion he needed.

As a nod to the timelessness of magic and the characters, the language they used would be a bit stilted. For instance, they would not use modern contractions.

I think it worked. Read the first two pages of the story and decide for yourself.

### **The First Two Pages of “Pyewackett”**

I stood on an upended barrel, my front paws on the counter of the dimly lit shop. From the single window, high on the wall, a shaft of sunlight sliced through the air, lighting up dancing dust motes. Scents of exotic spices and wood smoke tickled my sensitive nose.

My whiskers twitched as Mr. Bertram, esteemed purveyor of charms and potions, tapped his chin thoughtfully. I waited patiently.

Cats are good at patience.

Finally he spoke. “A love potion, eh? For your mistress?”

“Yes.”

“And your mistress is a human?”

“She is a witch.”

Mr. Bertram frowned. “A witch? Then why does she need my potion? Why not brew her own, or cast a spell?”

I sighed. “Zarya does not realize she is a witch, so she does not use her powers. At least not intentionally. Many in today’s world do not recognize magic anymore.”

“Sad, but true.” Mr. Bertram turned and surveyed the shelves behind him. They were jammed with myriad bottles, jugs, boxes, and vials of various sizes and colors. “These days, magic does not get the respect it deserves. Certainly not like it used to.”

He reached up and seized a small wooden carrier holding a half-dozen vials filled with a murky lavender liquid. He removed one and laid it on the counter. "This should do it."

"What is in it?" I asked, not sure he would answer. But since many potions contain dangerous ingredients, it paid to be careful.

"This is very potent. Base is powdered heart of swan. One who has died of a broken heart. That often happens to swans when their mates die."

I nodded, pleased that he didn't seem to be worried about giving out trade secrets.

"Also myrrh, mandrake root, and lettuce," he continued. "Dissolved in wine vinegar. And," here he winked at me, "it needs to have been mixed at just the right phase of the moon, with just the right incantations, or the results are not reliable."

Lettuce should be all right, as should the wine vinegar. I wasn't sure about the myrrh and the powdered heart of swan. But I knew the mandrake root could be deadly.

"Is it safe?" I asked.

"One does need to be careful. It's best to administer it in several small doses, rather than all at once. A drop or two in a glass of wine or a mug of mead every day for a week."

Mead? Zarya drank wine, and I knew she had beer in her refrigerator. "Would beer work?"

"Should. Anything alcoholic, really. Even whiskey, although the higher the alcohol content, the easier it is to overdose. And keep it away from dairy products."

"You mean like milk?"

"Definitely don't put it in milk. Even a drop is likely to be fatal to your average human. It can cause digestive difficulties if cheese or cream or anything like that is consumed too close to the dosage."

I swished my tail. "Anything else I should know?"

Mr. Bertram lifted an eyebrow. "Results are not instantaneous. You must be patient."

"Not a problem."

He peered down at me. "Your mistress sent you?"

"No. She does not know I have come."

"Will you tell her you have this?"

"I will try. But even if she is willing to listen, she will likely dismiss the entire idea as nonsense."

"So you will be the one to administer the potion?"

“Yes.”

“To your mistress herself or to an object of her affections?”

“Object of her affections. He is a soldier, who is returning from war. He has leave for over the holidays, and arrives tomorrow. I have heard them talk over the phone. While she is deeply in love with him, I have reason to believe he sees her as a mere convenience.”

“Ah.”

“I fear that, all too soon, she will be pining away with unrequited love. Since I have recently adopted the position of her familiar, I feel I must do all in my power to bring her happiness.”

“By nature and by circumstance, warriors often engage in fleeting relationships. Be aware that once the potion reaches the right concentration in the body, the one to whom it is administered will fall in love with the next appropriate creature who appears in his line of vision.”

“I will take great care.”

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KM Rockwood draws on a varied background for stories, including as a laborer in steel fabrication and glass making, and supervising an inmate work crew in the library of a large state prison, and work as a special education teacher in correctional institutions, inner city, and alternative public schools. Presently retired and devoting time to creative writing. Published works include the Jesse Damon Crime Novel series (Wildside Press) and numerous short stories.

Website: [kmrockwood.com](http://kmrockwood.com)