

The Enchanted Culinary Contest

by Marlena Cannon

The baking pavilion was perfectly still as the Enchanted Bake-Off finalists waited by their stations, the silence growing in the warm air like dough proving. Copper mixing bowls and glassware gleamed in the sun slanting through the pavilion's open sides.

Lilimari glanced to her left. She wasn't surprised that Myristica had made it to the finals. The pointy-eared Helvenkin's perfectly decorated cakes had wowed the judges, although they'd warned her that she sometimes prioritized style over flavor. Myristica now stared at her measuring scales as if they might betray her.

To Lilimari's right, Rondo, a faun, was humming an improvised melody. The judges had fallen in love with his unique flavors. His last bake had partially collapsed, but it had still earned him a coveted shoulder pat from one of the judges.

Lilimari wondered how she ended up making it this far in the competition. Feeling inadequate, she stuffed her hands into the pockets of the apron her landlady, Daniella, had given her that morning. The apron responded by cinching itself a little tighter.

"Back straight, dear. You're hunched like a harpy."

Lilimari stiffened. "Did you just... talk?"

The voice sounded like it was inside her own head.

Was the apron cursed?

Why would Daniella give her a cursed apron?

Unless... it was a spirit, someone helpful. If there was a soul stitched into the fabric, did that make it a Soul Anchor?

"How rude! I am not a Soul Anchor. That kind of magic will twist your soul," the apron insisted, tugging itself straight. It actually sounded a lot like Daniella herself.

But Lilimari had no time to contemplate that now as the two judges appeared on a raised dais.

“Welcome to the finals!” announced Philomena, as the applause died down for the famous enchanted food culinarian. “Contestants, you must wow us not just with flavor, but with presentation and spellcraft. You may also use one special ingredient from home.”

Beside her, the second judge—P.B., a silverback gorilla and acclaimed food critic—thumped the floor with one enormous fist.

“Good reminder,” Philomena added, nodding, “no casting spells on other contestants or their bakes.” Then she winked over the rims of her round, green-tinted glasses. “If there’s cheating, at least impress us with it.”

At the sound of the starting bell, Lilimari sprinted to the pantry shelves and filled her basket with flour, sugar, eggs, and spices.

Back at her station, she glanced around in confusion. Neatly stacked at the edge of her table sat four perfectly ripe pears.

With no time to figure out where they came from, she ignored the pears and started mixing her sponge cake batter.

“Bit more cardamom, dear,” suggested the apron.

Suddenly, its strings snapped out, slapping a levitating spoon out of the air!

Startled, Lilimari spun to see the rogue spoon clatter to the floor. She turned back to her mixing bowl—and frowned. Had her whisk always had a red handle?

She looked up as Myristica carried her baking pan to the pavilion’s centerpiece: a towering cast iron oven with three separate chambers and a shared firebox powered by a salamander. Each finalist had their name engraved on a brass plate above their assigned door.

Hurrying, Lilimari poured her batter into a bundt pan and ran it to her oven chamber. She fussed with the flues and dampers, adjusting the airflow just right. Although the heat source was shared, each baker could control their own chamber’s temperature this way.

As her cake baked, she reached for her special ingredient and began preparing the ghost glaze with shaking hands. The night before, she’d performed her Secret Séance, speaking to the soot sprites through ashes taken from the oven and inviting them to share their stories. Now, she stirred those memories into the shimmering violet glaze.

Midway through the bake, Lilimari opened her oven chamber, removed her cake, and carefully poured the ghost glaze over the top. As it touched the warm surface, it began to evaporate, rising in slow, curling spirals. She quickly shut the heavy iron door.

Good thing the glaze wasn't meant to stay on the cake. It drifted into the spectral space between the oven chambers, unbeknownst to all but her—and maybe the salamander in the fire box.

Returning to her station, she noticed the pears were gone. She gazed at the empty space on her prep table, then at the whisk with its red handle. To her left, Myristica was studiously avoiding eye contact.

“Good, let her think she got away with it,” said the apron in a self-satisfied tone.

To her right, Rondo was just now getting his pear dish to the oven.

A sardonic smile slowly spread across Lilimari's face.

The cake was not her true entry, only the host. She'd prepared the glaze far away from Rondo's poached pears, so they'd never learn her dish's secrets. And no matter what spell Myristica had placed on the switched whisk, it wouldn't touch the glaze now haunting the oven chambers.

It wasn't Lilimari's sponge the judges would taste—it was everything her ghost glaze touched.

All too soon, time was up!

Myristica presented her dish first: bread pudding glazed in a regret reduction sauce—which contained an entire bottle of port.

“Hmph, just because she's been ahead in the competition so far, she thinks this will make the judges confident in their choices so far and solidify her place,” muttered the apron.

Or get them drunk, Lilimari thought.

P.B. took a careful bite for someone so large and let out a low grunt of approval.

Philomena dabbed her lips. “This is beautiful. Strangely, it reminds me of my early days in the Guild. Not that I regret a thing—so well done, there.”

Next, Rondo stepped forward with his dish of poached pears fanned across a burnt sugar disk. Philomena took a dainty bite.

P.B. slapped the table, vocalizing.

“How could you have known *that* about P.B.’s mother?” asked Philomena, eyes wide with surprise.

The faun frowned. “My pears poach secrets... but they were supposed to steal flavor profiles from my competition,” he admitted.

“Delicious, but I don’t know that the spell component was entirely successful,” said Philomena.

Finally, Lilimari approached the dais with her modest sponge cake.

“This isn’t my entry,” she said as she set it on the table.

“Then what is?” Philomena asked, regarding her over her beetle-green glasses.

“That pudding. Those pears. My ghost glaze evaporated in the oven and slipped between the chambers. It pulled memories from the oven itself—past bakes, stories—and carried them into the nearest dishes.”

“So... your dish flavored the pudding and the pears with memories?” asked Philomena, raising an eyebrow.

The judges stepped away to confer with each other.

Then the winners were announced: Myristica took first place. Lilimari second. Rondo third.

The audience applauded.

As Lilimari turned to leave the dais, P.B. gave her a pat on the shoulder. Gentle as it was, she nearly toppled over. She recovered, grinning.

The apron tugged its strings around her in a warm, firm hug.

“Well done, dear,” it murmured. “Philomena always had questionable taste.”

It really was Daniella’s voice. Her landlady’s inner monologue, lovingly lent to Lilimari as a kind of mentor, reminding her she could do this all along.