

THE TRIAL

By Jeff Dunne

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## CHARACTERS

- ELDER ONE Charles is the lead Elder. He is a patient, thoughtful, and purposeful man.
- ELDER TWO Colin Farnsworth is an Elder from another city who has come to represent an “unbiased” perspective. He is judgmental, and strongly opposed to the practice of witchcraft.
- ELDER THREE Michael Downing has a fiery, intolerant personality, and enjoys serving as an Elder far too much. He is power hungry, blood-thirsty, and confidence-starved.
- WOMAN Mary is a smart and insightful woman who has a profound understanding of the nature of the universe, and through it found abilities that others consider to be magic.

SETTING

A dark council chamber.

TIME

Indeterminate, but hinting at the era of the Salem Witch Trials (i.e. end of the fifteenth century).

*(Three men in cowled robes sit behind a table, or perhaps in a semi-circle, facing a woman who has been brought before them for trial.)*

ELDER ONE

You have been charged in the presence of this council with the practice of witchcraft. How plead you?

WOMAN

*(Distainfully...)*

Plead.

ELDER ONE

How do you plead? Guilty or not guilty?

WOMAN

I will not plead to this *court*. I will not plead before you.

ELDER THREE

You will plead guilty or not guilty, and if you say nothing we will levy summary judgment.

WOMAN

You've already passed judgment, long before this trial commenced.

ELDER TWO

She obstructs justice. She's deliberately making a mockery of the tribunal.

WOMAN

A mockery? There is nothing I could say that would make this more of a mockery than it already is.

ELDER TWO

If you won't answer the que—

WOMAN

*(Directed at Elder Two...)*

You, Colin Farnsworth. You, sitting there in that robe, a hood over your face like I cannot see you for who you are. For *what* you are.

ELDER THREE

You see? Witchcraft!

WOMAN

What do you know of witchcraft, Michael Downing?

ELDER THREE

*(Pushing back his hood...)*

I know it when I see it. When a devil-spawn wo—

WOMAN

Devil-spawn? You know my parents. We were practically raised in the same house, you sanctimonious hypocrite.

ELDER TWO

We will have civility from you, witch.

WOMAN

See. You passed judgment long before—

ELDER ONE

This trial is for *your* benefit. If you'd—

WOMAN

*My* benefit? My *benefit*?! This trial is nothing more than an excuse. An excuse for you to kill a woman who frightens you.

ELDER THREE

You don't frighten me!

WOMAN

I scare the very bones out of your heartless chest!

ELDER TWO

Whether we are frightened or not is of no matter. A man is right to be scared of your dark magic.

WOMAN

And is that why you hide like a coward? Ashamed to reveal your face, even when you know that I—

ELDER TWO

*(Uncovering himself from the cowl...)*

I will face you. Will you face yourself?

WOMAN

*(Smiling, surprised that the man had even that much courage.)*

I face myself in every moment of every day.

ELDER ONE

Enough of this. How do you plead?

WOMAN

Show me your face.

ELDER ONE

How do you plead?

WOMAN

Show me your face, Charles.

*(There is a pause, and then Elder One removes his cowl.)*

You want to know how I plead?

ELDER ONE

Yes.

WOMAN

I don't know yet.

ELDER TWO

What nonsense is this?!

WOMAN

You accuse me of practicing magic, and so I ask you: what is magic?

ELDER THREE

She's stalling.

WOMAN

You accuse me of a crime, but cannot even define what that crime is. If you want to pretend that this... mockery... is a form of judgment, then at least play by your own rules. Define my wrong-doing.

ELDER ONE

You are accused of practicing witchcraft.

WOMAN

And what is it that a witch crafts? Does she weave baskets? Mold clay pots?

ELDER TWO

*(To Elder One...)*

Put an end to this.

ELDER ONE

This is a tribunal of justice. She wants us to define her crime, then let us do so. The craft of which we speak... is that of magic.

WOMAN

Magic.

ELDER ONE

That is correct.

WOMAN

That's just a word. A word like any other. You could say I practice stinsing or gerning or flindering. You create a word, but apparently cannot define it.

ELDER THREE

We all know what magic is.

WOMAN

Oh? Do you? Do you practice magic, then?

ELDER THREE

Of course not, but I know it when I see it.

WOMAN

So you look at something, and decide whether it's magic? How convenient for you. Anything that upsets you, then that is magic.

ELDER THREE

*(Repeating, angrier...)*

We all know what magic is.

WOMAN

You think that each of you share the same interpretation? I doubt it.

ELDER TWO

I say we do.

WOMAN

Then tell me what it is.

ELDER ONE

Magic is the use of otherworldly forces.

WOMAN

Otherworldly? Which other world would that be? Are you claiming that we live in many worlds, and then turning around to accuse *me* of witchcraft?

ELDER ONE

I did not say that we live in many worlds.

WOMAN

But you claim that there are forces that are not of this one, that are... unnatural.

ELDER ONE

I do.

WOMAN

Then give me an example of one.

ELDER TWO

Clairvoyance. To know things that you could not know.

WOMAN

You think I know things that I could not know. Such as?

ELDER THREE

You knew our names.

WOMAN

It's magic for me to recognize your voice, Michael?

ELDER THREE

Mine perhaps, but not Colin's. You don't know Colin. He doesn't live here. You have never spoken to Colin, nor heard him speak, yet you knew him!

WOMAN

Is that what you call magic. (*A statement, not a question.*) And if I told you that I knew who he was because of his association with you and Charles? Can we then dismiss this nonsense and go back to our lives?

ELDER THREE

You can *claim* anything. You *would* claim anything to assert your innocence.

WOMAN

And you would say anything to assert my guilt.

ELDER ONE

This is not a personal vendetta. You are not here because you are clever. You are here because you have been seen t—

WOMAN

To practice magic. Yes, you said that. What you have failed to do is define it.

ELDER ONE

Then let us define it as doing things that normal people cannot.

WOMAN

You mean like making a rational connection that others (*looking deliberately at Elder Three*) are too stupid to make on their own?

ELDER ONE

I *mean*... doing things that defy the natural world.

WOMAN

And *you* define what constitutes the natural world.

ELDER THREE

You're damn right we do!

ELDER ONE

Peace, Michael. But yes, we do. Not just one of us, but the whole of society.

WOMAN

So anyone who does something that is not within the capacity of the whole of society is practicing magic?

ELDER THREE

That's right.

WOMAN

Charles, I know your son. He is an athletic young man, is he not?

*(There is a pause, as Elder One attempts to see where this is going.)*

ELDER ONE

He is.

WOMAN

I saw him the other day in the field. Did you know that he can jump so high into the air that he can somersault entire and land again on his feet?

ELDER ONE

Yes.

WOMAN

*(Turning on Elder Three)*

Can you do that? Can you, Mr. Downing? *(She waits a moment for a response, then...)* I thought not. Can you, Mr. Farnsworth? Hmm, can you?

ELDER TWO

No.

WOMAN

So Charles, will you now charge your son with the practice of witchcraft for his unnatural, otherworldly jumping?

ELDER ONE

It is not the same.

WOMAN

He can do a thing that others cannot, and that – by your own very words – is the definition of magic.

ELDER ONE

But it can be explained. It is a sensible, understandable thing.

WOMAN

What I have done is sensible. What I have done is understandable. That *you* don't understand it is only because you choose not to.

ELDER TWO

It does not require dark arts to understand jumping.

WOMAN

You seek to cement my guilt through insidious words. Dark arts. Why not call them light arts? Or happy arts?

ELDER TWO

You were seen to move objects without touching them! That is no—

WOMAN

And it bothers you that I can do such a thing that you do not understand.

ELDER THREE

It is magic! And she admits her act!

ELDER TWO

She admits her guilt!

WOMAN

Tell me, Colin. Does your wife bake bread? (*A pause.*) What? Are you afraid to speak of something so benign?

ELDER TWO

She does.

WOMAN

And when she bakes this bread, does it rise?

ELDER TWO

What does this—

WOMAN

Does it rise?

ELDER TWO

Of course it does.

WOMAN

And do you know why?

ELDER TWO

What?

WOMAN

It was a simple question. Do you know why it rises?

ELDER TWO

No.

WOMAN

So does that make it witchcraft, then? Shall we try your wife for her magic baking?

ELDER THREE

That is not witchcraft!

WOMAN

But why not? Does plain flour rise when one heats it? Does yeast puff up on its own in the afternoon sun? But when she undertakes a special ritual, suddenly the lump of dough rises. And you. Can't. Explain it.

ELDER ONE

But the process is known.

WOMAN

So then you assert that doing a thing for which the process is wholly unknown, *that* is magic.

ELDER ONE

Yes, I suppose that is as good a definition as any.

WOMAN

And you further claim that there is no such *magic* that you practice.

ELDER ONE

That is right.

WOMAN

Then we are done here.

ELDER ONE

You are ready to enter a plea?

WOMAN

Oh, no. You are. If you should think to raise a hand against me, that is.

ELDER TWO

I grow weary of this.

WOMAN

I will enter a plea. I ask only that you raise your hand when you are ready... (*a pause, until eventually Elder Two raises his hand...*) ready to declare yourself a practitioner of magic.

ELDER THREE

What nonsense is this?

WOMAN

*(Turning to Elder Two.)*

If you are no magician, then you will be able to tell me how you did that.

ELDER TWO

Did what?

WOMAN

Raised your hand. We all bore witness. Do you deny what you did?

ELDER TWO

Raised my hand?

WOMAN

Yes. And so I charge you: Explain how you did it, or confess to the use of magic.

ELDER TWO

I simply raised my hand.

WOMAN

Yes, but how? How, Colin Farnsworth? What process did you use? What *natural* impetus caused your muscles to contract? What was the *cause*?

ELDER THREE

Enough of this.

WOMAN

*(Ignoring him and continuing on...)*

Did someone lift it for you? Or did you simply move it through *intent*, through *will*. You thought about it, and the hand moved.

ELDER THREE

She's insane!

WOMAN

You moved it with your mind! You know it! You did it, and you cannot explain how. By your own definition—

ELDER THREE

Enough of this nonsense!

WOMAN

That is magic!

WOMAN

Tell me! Tell me how you did it! But you can't, can you? Because you don't know. All you know is that you wanted your hand to rise, and it did. What makes that mystery acceptable, and mine an excuse for murder!?

ELDER THREE

*(To Elder One...)*

Silence her!

WOMAN

Charles... Tell me, Charles. Can you tell me how you do it? How through nothing but *will* you control your movements? Do you deny the existence of will?

ELDER ONE

*(He is beginning to wonder if the elders might have made a mistake in holding trials such as these.)*

I cannot explain it.

WOMAN

That's right. None of us can. It's a mystery with no solution. No, I don't mean unsolved, I mean it defies solution. It is the unknowable, and so people choose to forget. They forget that nearly everything they do is shrouded in mystery. In *magic*. And I can see in your face that you are now starting to appreciate what I know – that there is so much in this world that we *don't* understand. So much more than what we do.

ELDER ONE

I don't—

WOMAN

You know what growing up is, don't you? Indoctrination. Children don't become adults by learning how the world works. They do it by learning to ignore what others don't believe. What others *tell* them is impossible.

ELDER ONE

*(He believes her, is longing to join her world despite feeling trapped by his own history...)*

Mary...

WOMAN

Don't shut yourself away, Charles. You see it now! The door has opened for you. You can be more than some puppet in a robe! Let the unknown return. It's real, Charles. More real than anything else you know. Uncertainty is where everything happens. Let yourself—

ELDER THREE

Enough!

ELDER ONE

*(Jerked back to his known world, accepting that he is trapped in it, he is warning and practically pleading her to join him in it...)*

Mary...

MARY

You think you're choosing security. But you're not! You're choosing stagnation, and it's already killed you once. But you have a chance for rebirth. Grab for it! *Will* for it! Don't slip back—

ELDER ONE

*(Knowing he has no other choice...)*

This tribunal finds you...

WOMAN

Don't... Charles don't...

ELDER ONE

*(Sentencing himself as much, or even more, than her...)*

Guilty.

*(The woman raises her hand in a gesture of power, and the lights black out, ideally to the sound of a thunderclap.)*