

The Student Mage:

The Guide



By Delfina Booth

Introduction

When I first studied abroad in Mexico City in 2018, I was not expecting to find myself surrounded by the medium I'd taken on as an obscure interest back in the United States. Having been a huge anime fan myself on the Language for Business and Technology (LBAT) at Georgia Tech, I was quite caught off guard to see its presence be so ubiquitous. When I first sought out a manga (Japanese comic) shop in the Condesa neighborhood in only half-serious hopes of finding some translations with which to practice my Spanish, I found there were not one, but two only a few blocks away from my host house. That was far from the end of it.

As the program continued, I saw anime t-shirts and hoodies on the people we passed in the streets. Anime characters populating graffiti and murals, and used to advertise shops. At the markets, seemingly every few stalls sold posters, clothes, and keychains (all of varying levels of authenticity) promoting the current anime hits. It was the same with many stretches of street shops, and with corner stands. In fact, the corner stands were the most surprising, because they often sold pieces for cosplay (the practice of dressing up as fictional characters, typically associated with anime outside of Japan) as well- including *Naruto* headbands and robes, and *Cardcaptor Sakura* wands.


Before Mexico, I had seen displays like this in the US in particular mall shops and at fan conventions like Dragoncon and Momocon. I was not, however, used to seeing them this casually, in these numbers, in my everyday life. It seemed that in Mexico City, what I considered a niche area of interest was a commonplace thing. I would later learn that it wasn't just Mexico City, it was all of Mexico, and it wasn't just Mexico, it was all of Latin America. However, my personal fascination started on this LBAT.

I am a Global Media and Cultures major, a decision stemming from my lifelong love of animation. This interest is not limited to Japanese anime- it began with 1990's *Nicktoons*, in fact- but it has narrowed in on it in recent years. One of the most interesting parts of media for me is the variety of stories it can tell, from different places, traditions, and identities. Stories reflect the societies they come from, which makes pop media a deceptively important topic, and the exchange of said media a fascinating one. This is especially true when properties become popular in a region outside their own, like the case I witnessed here.

My goals for the GMC program are not solely academic, however. I have also been working to cultivate my creative abilities, and will continue those efforts through my final project: the production bible you are reading now. My interest in Mexico and anime's overlap largely stems from a desire to create my own culturally-informed, illustrated products. In this book, I have created an outline for an anime-style series of my creation, set in Mexico and influenced by Mexican culture, in a way that I hope can parallel Japanese culture's influence on anime.

Growing up in the US, it was (and is) rare for me to see other cultures present in the content I consumed. When it did occur, it was clearly a matter of conscious representation, the "other" being portrayed for a US audience. I believe US media depictions of Latin America suffer from this particularly. While strides have been made from the near-invisibility Mexico once faced in animation, notable examples of representation such as *Coco*, *The Book of Life*, and *El Tigre: Adventures of Manny Rivera* can still feel one-note. Works like these appear to choose one or two "Mexican" elements that are well-known in the US- wrestling, mariachi, the Day of the Dead- and are reluctant to explore further. As cartoonist Jhonen Vasquez once tweeted:



Jhonen Vasquez 
@JhonenV

...

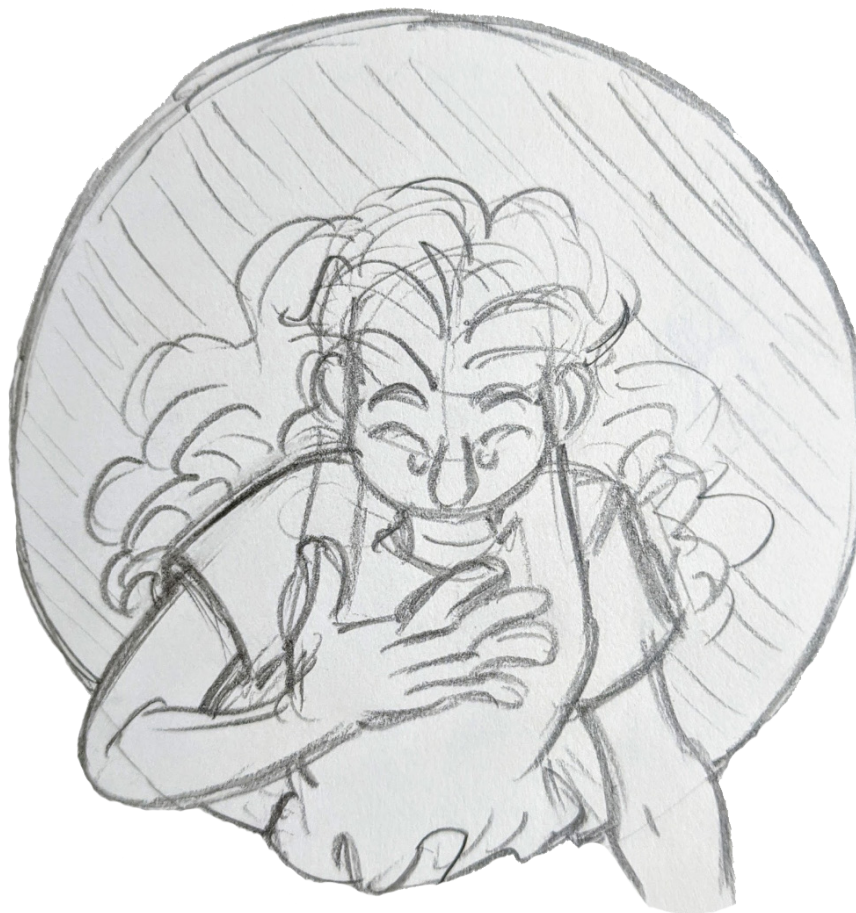
As a Mexican American who identifies as non-mariachi, when will Hollywood make an animated feature that I can relate to?

4:24 PM · Mar 15, 2017 · Twitter Web Client

I see anime as a medium worth looking to when imagining an alternative to this style of representation. Anime has proven its global appeal over the past decades, but it is also unmistakably Japanese- an impressive feat when the majority of its characters sport unnatural hair colors. Japanese values, beliefs, and archetypes are apparent in the foundation of all anime products, even when inspired by or set in non-Japanese locations. I want to emulate that spirit with Mexican culture.

This book is the manifestation of that vision, and the work that has gone into it over the last two months. Here, you can see my plans for the characters, world, and plot, as well as the real-life, fictional, and mythological inspirations that shaped them all. I hope you enjoy.

Delfina Booth





Anime products being sold at various stalls and stores I came across



Anime at *Mexico City Pride*



Porco Rosso restaurant in Mexico City, named after the 1992 *Studio Ghibli* film

The Series

The Student Mage tells the story of Angustias, a young witch-in-training working to hone her skills by providing magical services under the company MagX. When her mentor, powerful sorcerer Boti Carillo, reveals she is looking for an apprentice, Angustias decides she must prove her worthiness of the position. If she can use her magic to find out what her scheming ex-best friend is up to at the same time, all the better.



Magical System

The magical system used by the characters in *The Student Mage* pulls most of its rules and aesthetics from Mexican *brujería*. *Brujería* is Mexico's mythology of witchcraft. In both its fictional and "real life" manifestations, it operates under the rules of "hard magic." *Brujería* is done through spells, rituals, and potions; it is treated as a skill that can be learned rather than a supernatural power some are born with. I keep that approach in *The Student Mage*, with the characters studying and experimenting in order to improve their magic.

My research on *brujería* was done through a combination of academic investigation, in-person conversation, and interviews with experts on the subject. In both Mexico City and Tepoztlán, I visited a number of *brujería/magia* (magic) focused shops. In one in Tepoztlán, I bought two books with explicit recipes for various magical spells and rituals, which inspired some of the potions and ingredients in the series' episodes and art (though none were replicated directly, not taking any chances).

Mexican *brujería*, I found, has many international influences as well as those from indigenous Mexican practices. I noticed a recurring focus on Catholicism and saints, Buddhism, tarot, astrology, crystals, and herbology. The forms the practice took in also seemed to relate to DIY and counterculture scenes. Every magic shop I visited also featured work from independent local artists.

In my studies, I found a focus in Mexican *brujería* on *curanderismo*- curing the sick-, speaking with the dead, bringing wealth and love to oneself, and causing misfortune/vengeance to others. All forms of this magic appear in my story, either in the assignments Angustias completes, Varicela's personal efforts, or Boti's ill-gotten gains. There is also a sort of moral law I saw repeated often- that anything you do to an-

other may be done back to you. Similarly, any magic you use to give yourself an unfair advantage may result in bad luck down the line. In my story, I use the fear of this type of magical karma as a threat to the powerful elite of the story's world, who certainly use magic for their own gain.

The existing anime I pulled inspiration from for my series are *Sailor Moon*, *Cardcaptor Sakura*, and *MushiShi*. All are works I consider Japanese magical realism. The first two are *magical girl* genre anime that were highly popular in Mexico during the 90's anime boom, and the final is an obscure, but personal favorite, work that invents new Japanese myths. In all three series, the main characters use their status as magicians as something of a day job, and are called on different “missions” to tackle using their powers each episode. I thought this structure would logically apply to the world I was creating for my characters as well, where magic is simply another craft that someone can learn and use to their benefit.

Once I established that foundation of both existing inspiration and ever-developing knowledge on the *brujería* craft, the story came to me naturally.



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Perspectives from Experts

As part of my research on brujería, I spoke with three experts on the topic. The following are excerpts from our communication.



Fernando Renteria

Fernando Renteria

Fernando is a Mexico City artist who creates gothic paintings inspired by Mexican and international horror mythology.

Original in Spanish:

Delfina

Hola Fernando!

Espero que esté teniendo un buen día.

Soy Delfina, de la feria de arte de hoy. Estoy estudiando folklore mexicano para un proyecto en la universidad, especialmente el que involucra la magia, el terror y la brujería. Me pregunto si estaría dispuesto a responder algunas de mis preguntas con respecto a este tema.

Muchas gracias!

Fernando

Claro Delfina

Delfina

Entonces, cómo utilizas el folklore, en particular el folklore mexicano en tu arte?

Cuáles son tus otras inspiraciones?

Para mi proyecto en universidad, estoy creando un cómic y estoy considerando usar la brujería mexicana como punto de trama. Cuáles son tus pensamientos sobre esto? Hay alguna manera de que pueda hacerlo con respeto, o es un tema que, como estadounidense, debería dejar en paz?

Fernando

El folklore mexicano siempre ha sido asociado con la muerte pero con humor, elementos como diablos, calaveras, fantasmas y brujas son las piezas fundamentales que tomo del folklore mexicano para mostrar escenas emocionales que lleven a emociones como depresión, ansiedad, melancolía, etc.

Mis otras inspiración son el anime, tim burlón (sic), referencias de películas de terror 80s- 90s, Alan Poe, Guillermo del Toro y Disney.

...

Yo pienso que esta excelente que adaptes tu cómic a la brujería mexicana, el unico respeto que le podrías dar es investigando bien ya que es tan grande el universo de la brujería mexicana que te daría muchísimo universo para crear. Si fueras latina, europea, mexicana, etc, etc, el respeto es el mismo, lo que te va diferenciar de los demás es la cantidad de información de la que te documentes respecto al tema de la brujería

Me ha tocado observar que incluso hay personas del extranjero que no son mexicanos saben más de nuestra cultura que nosotros mismos y eso impresiona

Delfina

Muchas gracias por tu perspectiva!

English Translation:

Delfina

Hello Fernando!

I hope you are having a good day.

I'm Delfina, from the art fair today. I'm studying Mexican folklore for a college project, especially the kind that involves magic, horror, and witchcraft. I wonder if you would be willing to answer some of my questions regarding this topic.

Thank you very much!

Fernando

Of course, Delfina

Delfina

So how do you use folklore, in particular Mexican folklore, in your art?

What are your other inspirations?

For my project, I'm creating a comic and I'm considering using Mexican witchcraft as a plot point. What are your thoughts on this? Is there a way that I can do so respectfully, or is this an issue that as an American I should leave alone?

Fernando

Mexican folklore has always been associated with death but with humor, elements such as devils, skulls, ghosts and witches are the fundamental pieces that I take from Mexican folklore to show emotional scenes that lead to emotions such as depression, anxiety, melancholy, etc.

My other inspirations are anime, tim burlón (sic), 80s-90s horror movie references, Alan Poe, Guillermo del Toro and Disney.

...

I think it's excellent that you adapt your comic to Mexican witchcraft, the only respect you could give it is by researching well, since the universe of Mexican witchcraft is so large that it would give you a lot of universe to create. If you were Latina, European, Mexican, etc, etc, respect is the same, what will differentiate you from others is the amount of information you document on the subject of witchcraft.

I have had to observe that there are even people from abroad who are not Mexicans who know more about our culture than we do ourselves and that is impressive.

Delfina

Thank you very much for your perspective!

Cesar Bermudez

Cesar is an anthropologist who studies traditional witchcraft and magic mythology from different regions of Mexico. He currently works with the Mexican ancient combat group Gladiadores Cambiando Futuros. We met when I attended a late-night firefly tour of a forest, and as the assistant guide he shared (that is, tried to scare the group with) Mexican urban legends on witches and monsters the entire time.

Original in Spanish:

Delfina

¡Hola César!

Espero que esté teniendo un buen día. Soy Delfina, del recorrido de luciérnagas anoche.

Estoy estudiando folklora mexicano para un proyecto en la universidad, especialmente el que involucra la magia, el terror y la brujería. Me pregunto si estaría dispuesto a responder algunas de mis preguntas y/o compartir los recursos/contactos que tiene con respecto a este tema.

Cesar

Claro que sí, y con gusto te puedo compartir algunos contactos de amigos especializados en brujería e historia mexicana

Delfina

Entonces...

Que estudias? Por qué te interesa?

Cuáles son tus historias favoritas del folclore mexicano, especialmente aquellas que involucran brujería/magia?

Para mi proyecto en universidad, estoy creando un cómic y estoy considerando usar la brujería como punto de trama. Cuáles son tus pensamientos sobre esto? Hay alguna manera de que pueda hacerlo con respeto, o es un tema que, como estadounidense, debería dejar en paz?

Y si pudieras compartir tus otros contactos, eso también sería muy apreciado :)

Cesar

Ok, hola, perdón por tardar en responder, tuve mucho trabajo, bien mis historias referentes a la brujería en México, me gustan las historias de brujas tradicionales, aquellas mujeres que se quitan o cortan los pies, para convertirse en bolas de luz o guajolotes, van volando para meterse en las casas y chuparles la sangre a los niños, en cuestión de brujería, aquí en México existen muchas vertientes y diferencias entre norte, centro y sur del país, pero la leyenda que te comenté, es comun en todos lados, tambien existen los nahuales, pero ellos son brujos que regularmente se convierten en coyotes, perros o burros, algunas tradiciones dicen que en cuervo o algún otro animal, también es común aquella historia del charro negro, que compra tu alma a cambio de poder y dinero, te lo encuentras de noche principalmente en dónde los caminos se cruzan.

Personalmente a los mexicanos que les gusta el comic, no se sienten ofendidos si usan alguna leyenda o historia mexicana para desarrollar alguna producto díganos que la “apropiacion cutural” no es de mucha importancia. Por ejemplo las películas de coco, el libro de la vida, nos emociona más ver qué otras partes del mundo conozcan nuestras leyendas. Y si también lo haces desde una visión más cercana a la nuestra, es decir con informantes mexicanos, será mucho mejor. Busca los libros de Carlos Castaneda, sobre todo los primeros 4 que son: las enseñanzas de don Juan, relatos de poder, una realidad aparte y viaje a Ixtlán, habla acerca de un antropologo a cual convierten en brujo.

English Translation:

Delfina

Hi Cesar!

I hope you are having a good day. I'm Delfina, from the firefly tour last night.

I'm studying Mexican folklore for a college project, especially the kind that involves magic, horror, and witchcraft. I wonder if you would be willing to answer some of my questions and/or share any resources/contacts you have regarding this topic.

Cesar

Of course, and I can gladly share some contacts of friends specialized in witchcraft and Mexican history.

Delfina

In that case...

What do you study? Why does it interest you?

What are your favorite Mexican folklore stories, especially those involving witchcraft/magic?

For my college project, I'm creating a comic and I'm considering using witchcraft as a plot point. What are your thoughts on this? Is there a way that I can do it respectfully, or is this an issue that as an American I should leave alone?

And if you could share your other contacts, that would be greatly appreciated too :)

Cesar

Ok, hi, sorry for the delay in responding, I had a lot of work, well my stories about witchcraft in Mexico, I like the stories of traditional witches, those women who remove or cut off their feet, to become balls of light or turkeys, that fly to get into houses and suck the blood of children. In a matter of witchcraft, here in Mexico there are many aspects and differences between the north, center and south of the country, but the legend that I told you about is common everywhere. Nahuales also exist, but they are witches who regularly become coyotes, dogs or donkeys, some traditions say that a crow or some other animal. The story of the black charro is also common, who buys your soul in exchange for power and money, you find it at night mainly where roads cross.

Personally, Mexicans who like comics don't feel offended if they use a Mexican legend or story to develop a product. Let's say that "cultural appropriation" is not of much importance. For example, the movies *Coco*, *The Book of Life*, we are more excited to see that other parts of the world know our legends. And if you also do it from a perspective closer to ours, that is, with Mexican informants, it will be much better. Look for Carlos Castaneda's books, especially the first 4 which are: *The Teachings of Don Juan*, *Stories of Power*, *A Separate Reality* and *A Trip to Ixtlán*, he talks about an anthropologist who they turn into a witch.

Cutberto Enriquez

Cutberto Enriquez is an anthropologist who studies religion and magical thought. He studied Archeology at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (the National School of Anthropology and History). He is the orchestrator of a number of expositions on the subject, including *Brujería: insólitos objetos, fantásticas creaturas* and *Brujas: ¿diosas olvidadas o amantes del diablo?*

Original in Spanish and English:

Delfina

¡Hola! ¿Cómo está? Mi nombre es Delfina; soy una estudiante universitaria estadounidense que estudia en CDMX. Para mis estudios, estoy escribiendo un cómic basado en México, y estoy interesada en explorar el tema de la brujería mexicana. Cesar Bermudez me refirió a Ud. para obtener más información. ¿Estaría dispuesto a responder algunas de mis preguntas?

Cutberto

Ah si!

Mucho gusto. Si, Cesar ya me había comentado algo

Delfina

¿Qué hace con respecto a la brujería?

Cutberto

Ok

Soy arqueólogo y mi área de investigación ves la religión y el pensamiento mágico.

He montado algunas exposiciones con respecto al tema.

Así como colaborado con proyectos similares

Delfina

¿Cuáles exhibiciones? ¿Tiene un tema en particular que le interese más?

Cutberto

...Exposiciones:

Brujería: insólitos objetos, fantásticas creaturas

Instrumentos de tortura y pena capital

Leonardo y las máquinas

Asesinos seriales y pena de muerte

Vampiros y hombres lobo: mitos y realidades

Y la última que es la mía.

Brujas: ¿diosas olvidadas o amantes del diablo?

Las creencias hetero normativas de la gente y su supervivencia y evolución en la historia

Que es lo heteronormativo o creencias hetero normativas?

Lo heteronormativo es aquello que sale de lo sancionado y permitido por la cultura dominante o el círculo social dominante.

Las creencias heteronormativas son aquellas creencias y prácticas religiosas que no son mayorías o reconocidas por la cultura y /o poder político dominante

Delfina

Ajj muchas gracias!!

...Puedo preguntarle qué ha aprendido a través de la exposición? Quien estaba involucrado? Qué ha aprendido sobre la cultura moderna de las brujas mexicanas? ¿Cuáles son sus influencias y cómo se usa la magia?

Cutberto

Ok. Son varias respuestas.

Tanto antes de abrirla, durante y después hemos tenido contacto, asesoría y ayuda. Incluso donaciones de practicantes de la magia de diversas culturas. Chamanes, Golden dawn wicca, otro, magia ceremonial, vudú, regla osha/ifa, etcétera. Lo que se ha aprendido son cosas tanto buenas como malas desde como sobrevive, prospera y se adapta o mezcla la magia hoy día. ...

Qué ha aprendido sobre la cultura moderna de las brujas mexicanas?

Que está se adapta y crece en base o más bien en contexto a la cultura y fenómenos sociales actuales. La modernidad y la globalización están marcando la forma y práctica de la magia

...

Current witchcraft in Mexico (and perhaps in Latin America) drinks from two historical phases. Classical and modern witchcraft.

The modern manifests itself or begins to influence from the decade of the 50s with phenomena typical of

the nascent globalization and modernity. And they give rise to various points or moments where foreign magic manifests itself and mixes with Mexico.

Phenomena such as New age, hippis (sic), orientalism, among others, begin to flourish and appear in Mexico. Mainly in urban contexts.

From these urban contexts, little by little, it begins to influence other cities or towns.

But this is modern.

Historically, traditional Mexican witchcraft draws from 3 main currents.

Indigenous roots.

European roots, especially the Mediterranean.

African roots.

This syncretism of beliefs was so strong that in the middle of 1600-1700 cases of the holy office were presented where blacks practiced magic with pre-Hispanic magical articles and with European deities (such as angels).

Or vice versa.

This mix of knowledge, materials, articles and tools was strengthened from the 16th to the 20th century.

However, as I mentioned before, with the arrival of modernity, magical phenomena from other cultures began to appear from the 20th century and began to fight each other, to mix or simply coexist as it is today.

In the 50s and 60s, yoga, orientalism and phenomena such as Carlos Castaneda became fashionable.

In the 70s UFOs joined the themes

80s UFOs and shamanisms, as well as a character support appeared in politics towards magic.

In the 90s, mainly due to the influence of the web, television series and movies such as young witches or [The Craft], Wicca arrived.

...

And today there are from syncretisms to coexistence.

Delfina

Muchas gracias :) Muy interesante y útil

Gracias por su tiempo

Cutberto

My pleasure

English Translation:

Delfina

Hello! How is it going? My name is Delfina; I am an American college student studying in CDMX. For my studies, I am writing a comic based on Mexico, and I am interested in exploring the topic of Mexican witchcraft. Cesar Bermudez referred me to you for more information. Would you be willing to answer some of my questions?

Cutberto

Oh, yeah!

Nice to meet you. Yes, Cesar had already let me know.

Delfina

What do you with respect to witchcraft?

Cutberto

Ok

I am an archaeologist and my area of research is religion and magical thinking.

I have created some exhibitions on the subject.

As well as collaborated with similar projects

Delfina

What exhibits? Do you have a particular topic that interests you the most?

Cutberto

...Exhibitions:

Witchcraft: unusual objects, fantastic creatures

Instruments of torture and capital punishment

Leonardo and the machines

Serial killers and death penalty

Vampires and werewolves: myths and facts

And the last one is mine.

Witches: Forgotten Goddesses or Devil Lovers?

People's heteronormative beliefs and their survival and evolution in history

What is heteronormativity or heteronormative beliefs?

The heteronormative is that which comes out of what is sanctioned and permitted by the dominant culture or the dominant social circle.

Heteronormative beliefs are those religious beliefs and practices that are not recognized by the dominant culture and/or political power.

Delfina

Ah thank you very much!!

...May I ask what you have learned through the exhibition? Who was involved? What have you learned about the modern culture of Mexican witches? What are its influences and how is magic used?

Cutberto

Okay. There are several answers.

Both before opening [the exhibition], during and after we have had contact, advice and help. Even donations from practitioners of magic from various cultures. Shamans, Golden Dawn Wicca, other, ceremonial magic, voodoo, osha/ifa, etc. What has been learned are both good and bad things from how magic survives, thrives and adapts or mixes today. ...

What have you learned about the modern culture of Mexican witches?

That it adapts and grows based on, or rather in context to, current culture and social phenomena. Modernity and globalization are marking the form and practice of magic.

... (Continued in English above)...

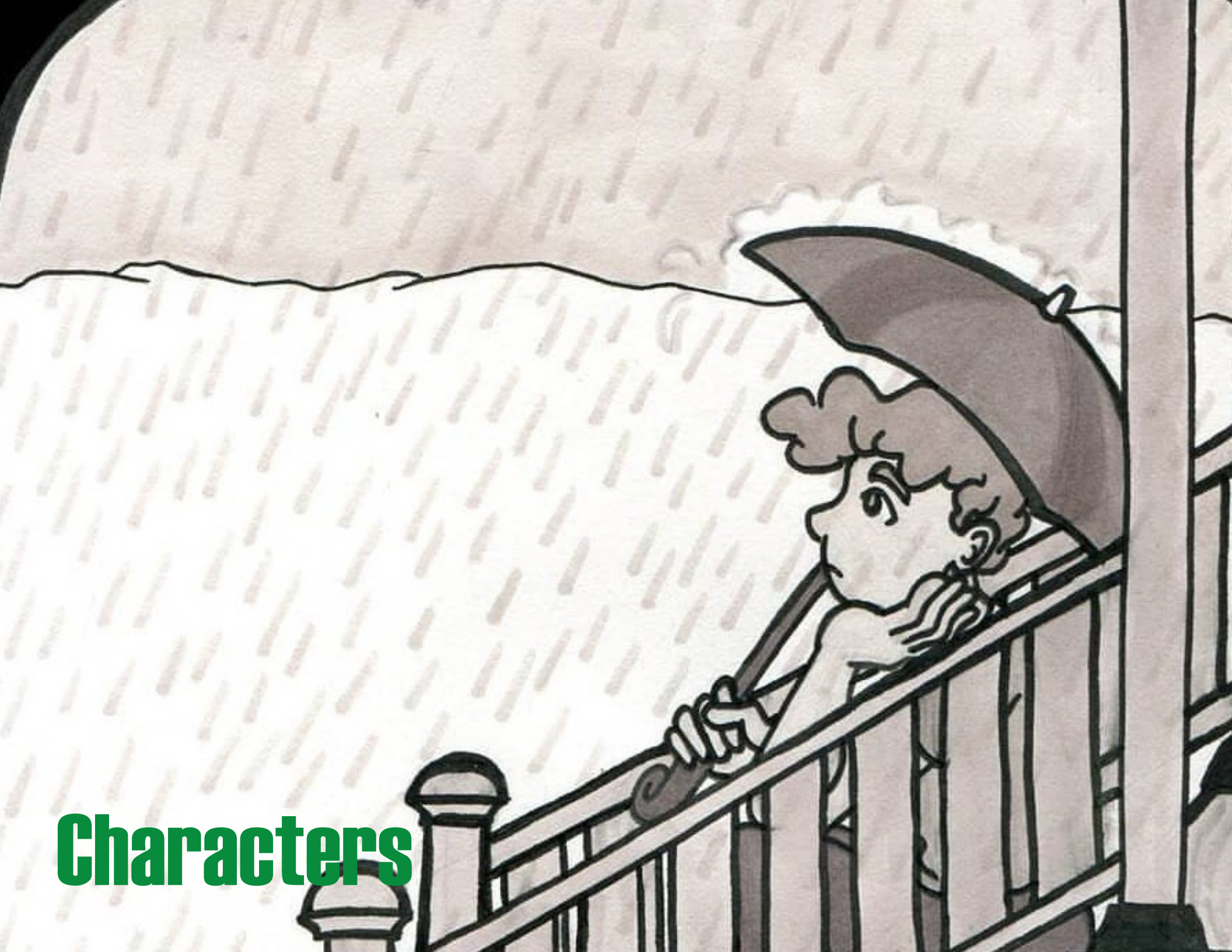
Delfina

Thank you very much :) Very interesting and useful

Thanks for your time

Cutberto

My pleasure

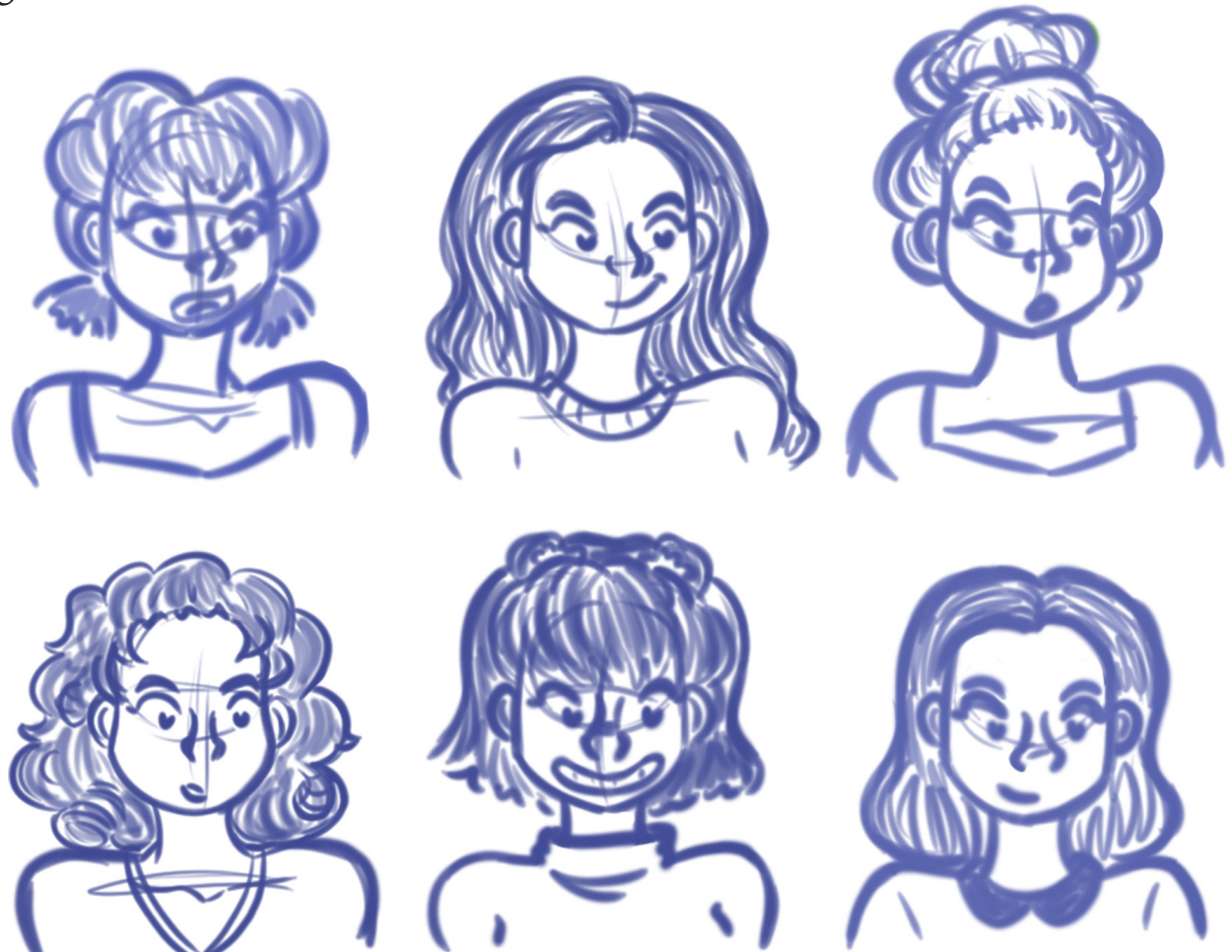


Characters

Angustias



Angustias is our main character, an aspiring witch hoping to become a master of her craft. She works for the company MagX as an on-call maga, a witch who provides magical services to those in need. In recent months, she has earned the honor of being mentored one-on-one by MagX's notoriously private CEO, Boti Carillo. There are rumors that Boti is looking for a full-time apprentice, and Angustias hopes to prove herself worthy of the role. That is, if she can stop her shady ex-best friend Varicela from putting them both in danger first.





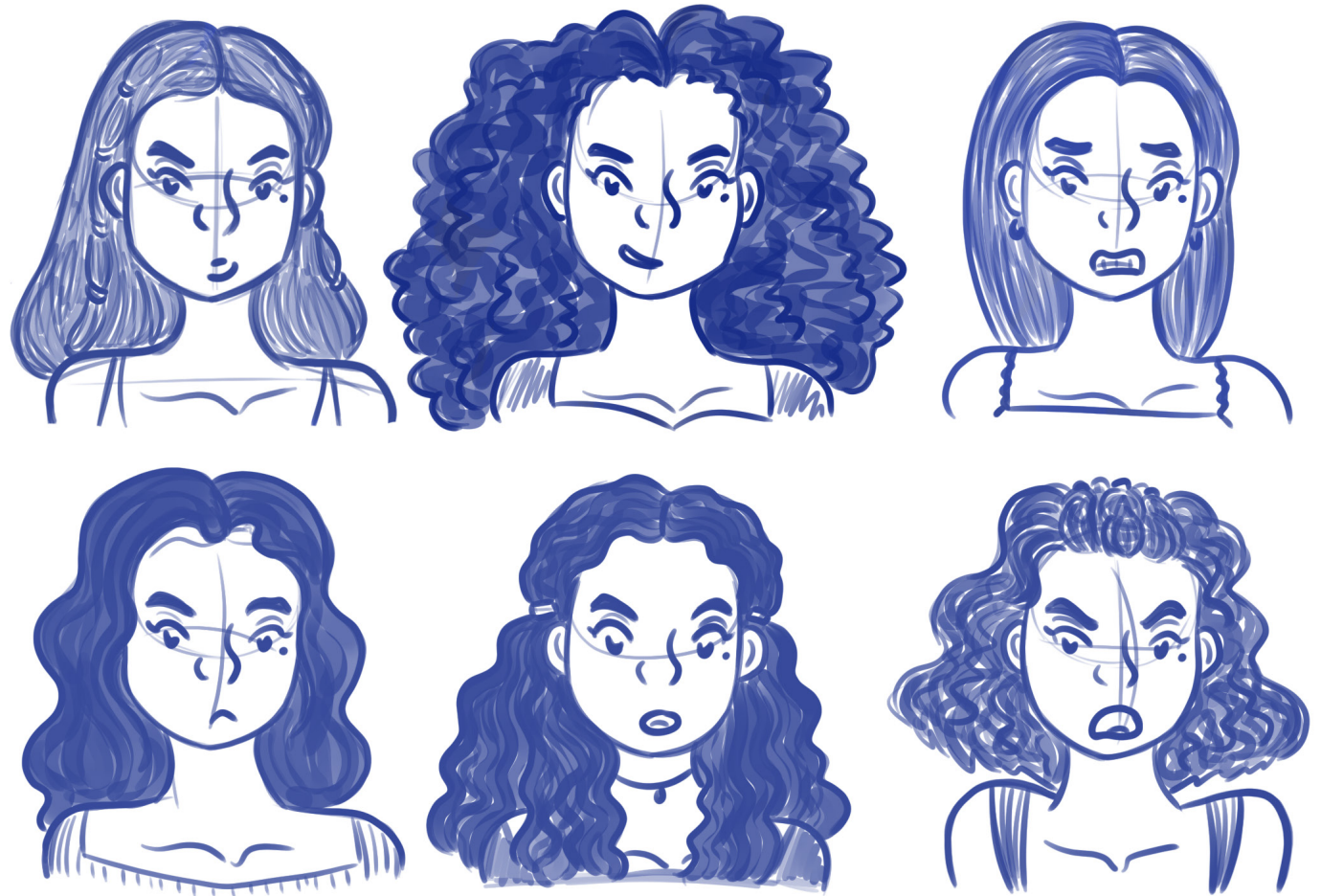
Early concepts from when the characters were younger (and Angustias has Varicela's beauty mark)

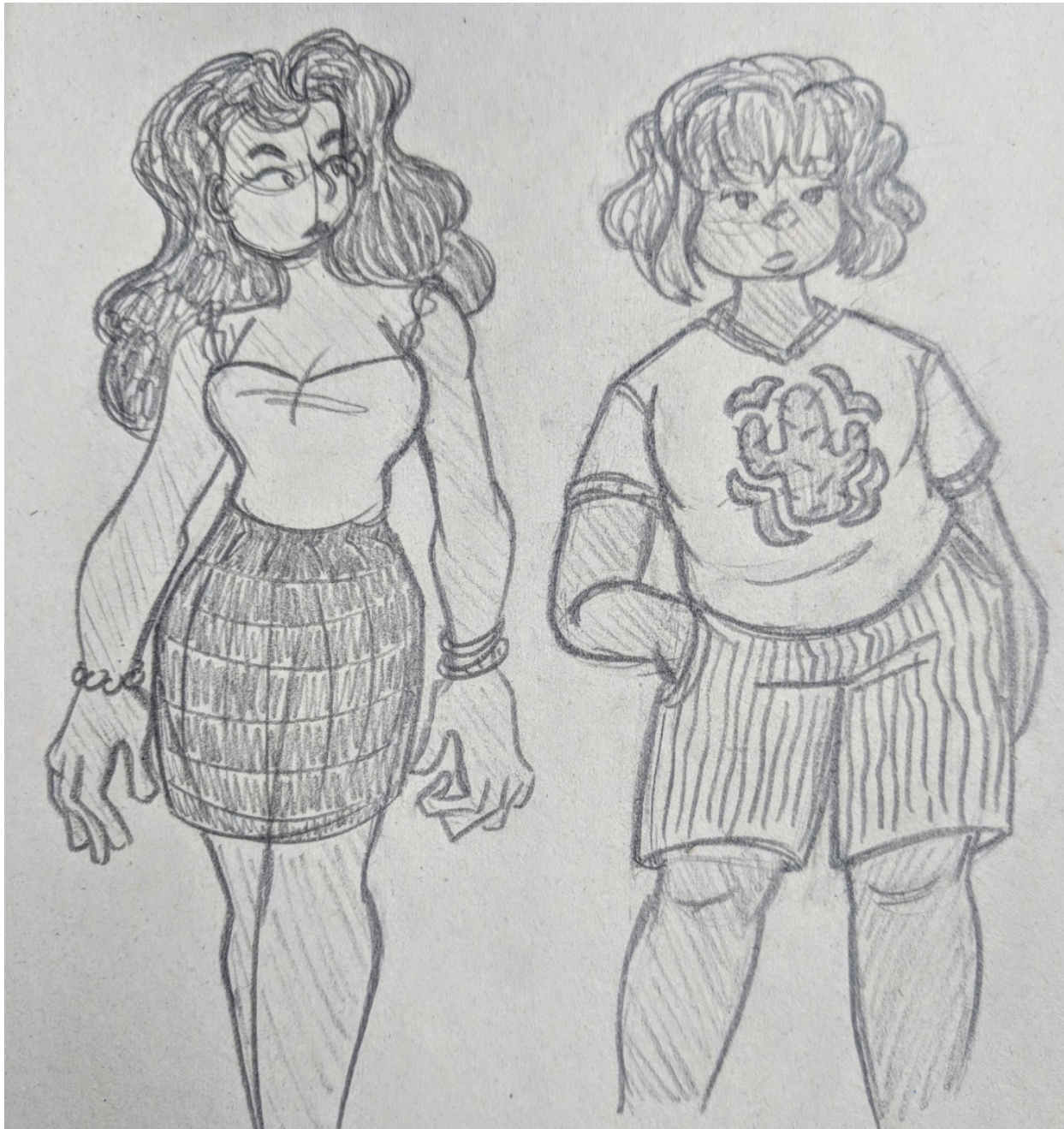


Varicela



Angustias' roommate and former best friend. She doesn't approve of Angustias working at MagX, particularly after their mutual best friend Milagros died there in a tragic ritual gone wrong just a year before. Since Milagros' death, Varicela has grown more distant from Angustias, and begun harboring more revolutionary ideas. Angustias is sure she wants nothing more than to sabotage her chances of learning from the masters, and recently, Varicela has been acting more suspicious than ever...

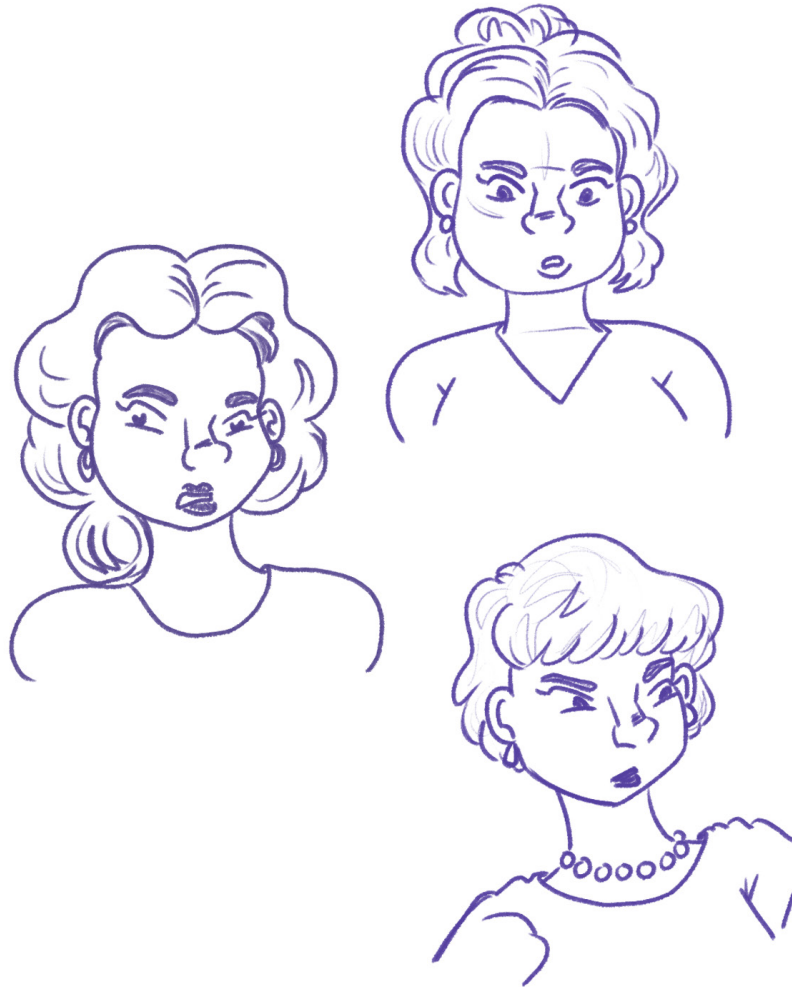
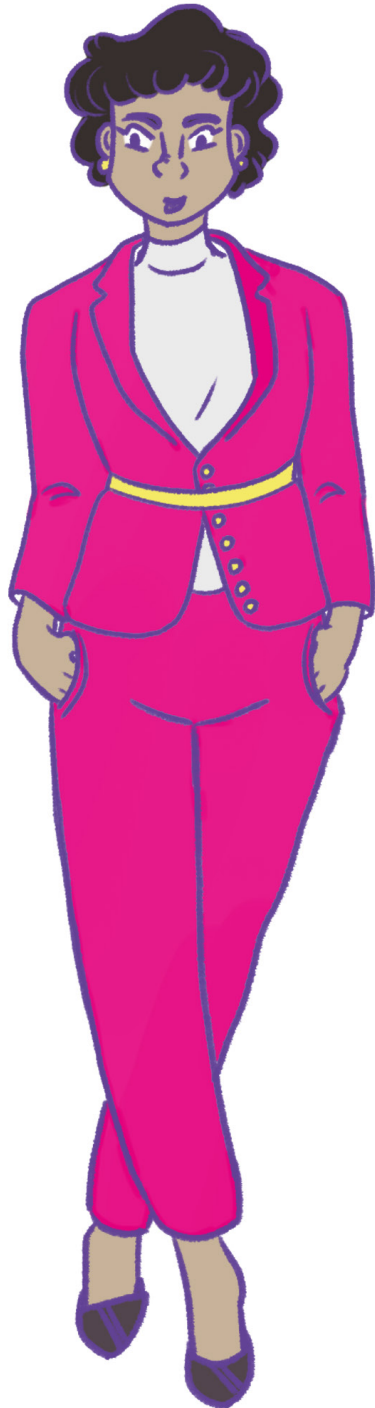




Early Varicela (left) and Angustias (left) concepts; early Varicela sketches

Boti Carillo

The elusive and powerful CEO of MagX and a supremely skilled magician. She is a mentor to Angustias, and Angustias hopes to work full-time with her soon.



Boti's suit is Mexican Pink, a family of pink shades that are used in Mexico City's branding. It appears on the taxis, in the metro station, on the official logo for the city, and for the postal service *Correos de México*, among others.



Milagros

The former mutual best friend of Angustias and Varicela. He died the previous year in a ritual gone wrong at MagX. In life, he had been extremely passionate about magic and hoped to become a powerful sorcerer. Through her efforts, Angustias hopes to carry on his memory.



Other Notable Elements

MagX

The sole centralized supplier of magical services to la Ciudad del Fina, headed (only our heroes know) by Boti Carillo. Dispatcher of magos and publisher of the most high-quality recipe books for potions and spells.

El Instituto

Autónomo de Magia

The main three's old university where they studied government-approved witchcraft. Varicela currently works at its library.

La Ciudad del Fina

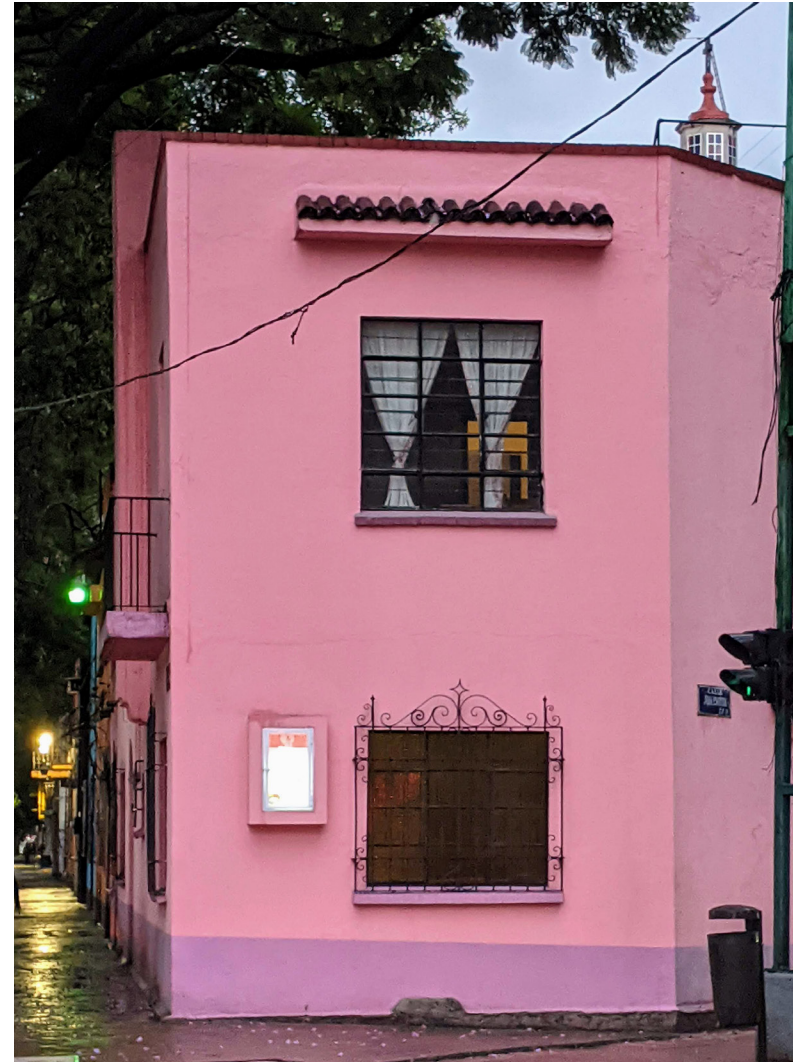
A bustling metropolis north of Chispas, where Angustias, Milagros, and Varicela moved to study magic after high school.

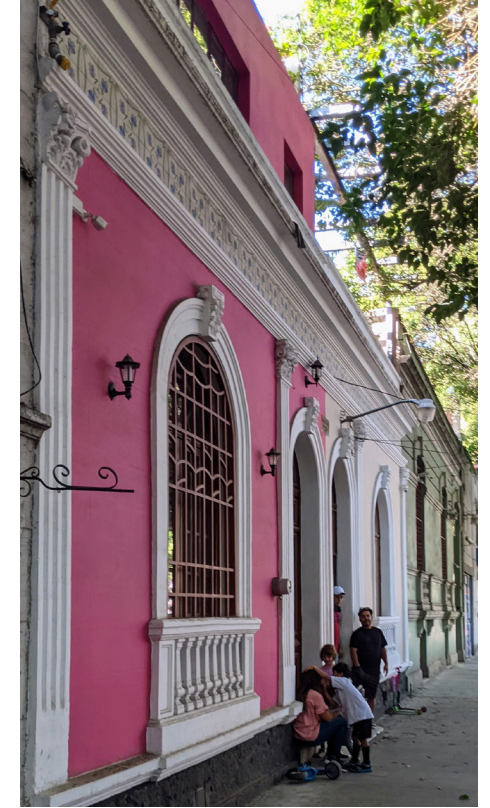
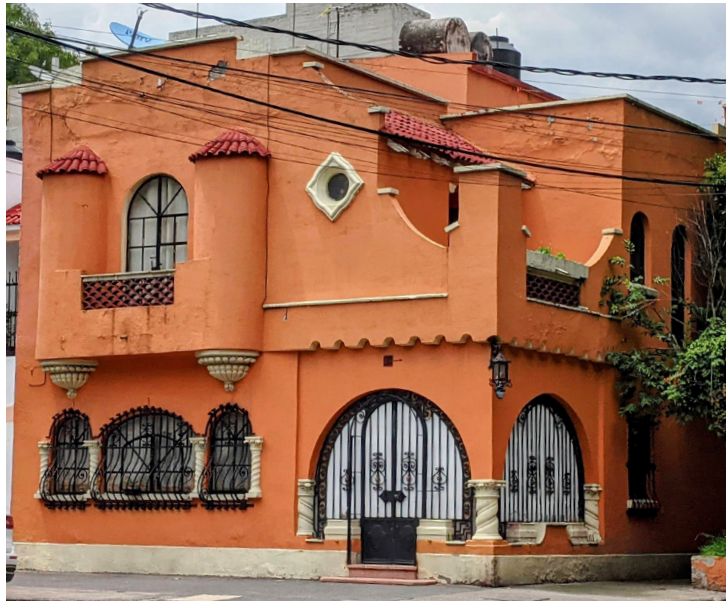
Chispas

A small mountain town south of la Ciudad; the main three's hometown.

The World of The Student Mage

The setting of The Student Mage is based on Mexico City and my observations from living there. Mexico City is huge and colorful, notable for its art and nature. The trait that stuck out to me the most was the architecture, which primarily followed a uniquely Latin, 20th century design style, and the bright colors that most of the buildings sported. Pastels dominate the cityscape.







Other elements that would be necessary to include in order to accurately evoke Mexico City are on the following pages...

Bikes, Shrines, Carts, & Stands

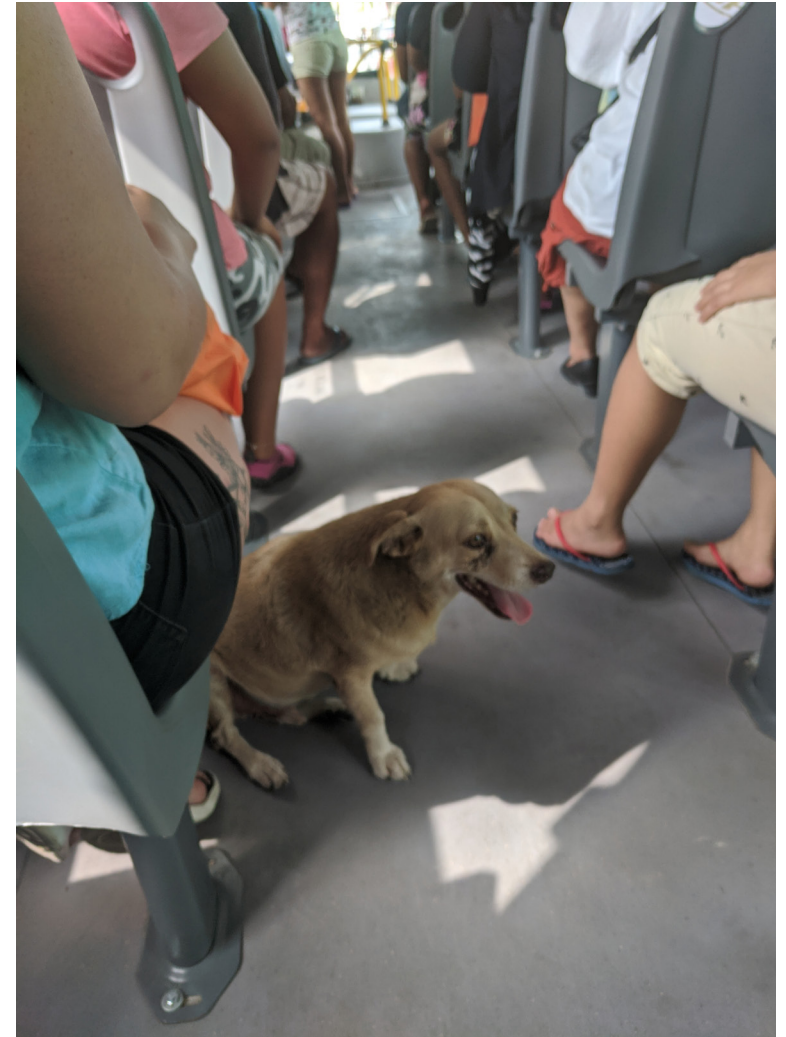


Murals & Stickers



Dogs

It's a bit odd to emphasize dogs as a prominent feature of a city, but you'll have to trust me that Mexico City is an incredibly dog friendly-place. Every walk my roommate and I took we encountered many, in and outside of stores and on buses, often being walked in large clusters by professional caretakers, and, perhaps even more frequently, simply trotting along by their masters without a leash. Dogs in Mexico City are very well-behaved.



Tepoztlán

Chispas, the hometown of Angustias, Varicela, and Milagros, is loosely based on my and my roommate's weekend visit to Tepoztlán. Tepoztlán is a mountain town about an hour south of Mexico City, classified by the government as a *pueblo mágico* (magical town). It is known for its ornate churches and for being the birthplace of the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl. In my time there, I was taken by the landscape and the proximity of the mountains. The nature was even more gorgeous and prominent than in the city.

Whether you're a believer or not, you can feel the magic in the area. There, my roommate and I hiked and encountered a real life White Rabbit in the form of a friendly guide dog. We also participated in a *temazcal* ceremony, done by a shaman in the backyard of her house.

Tepoztlán was also where I visited one of the first shops I found dedicated to the study of witchcraft, and bought my recipe books for black and white magic spells. The shop owner was very helpful. In fact, it was a little frightening how eager he was to help me learn the dark arts, but I appreciated the guidance.





Angustias' Room



Varicela's Room



Fashion

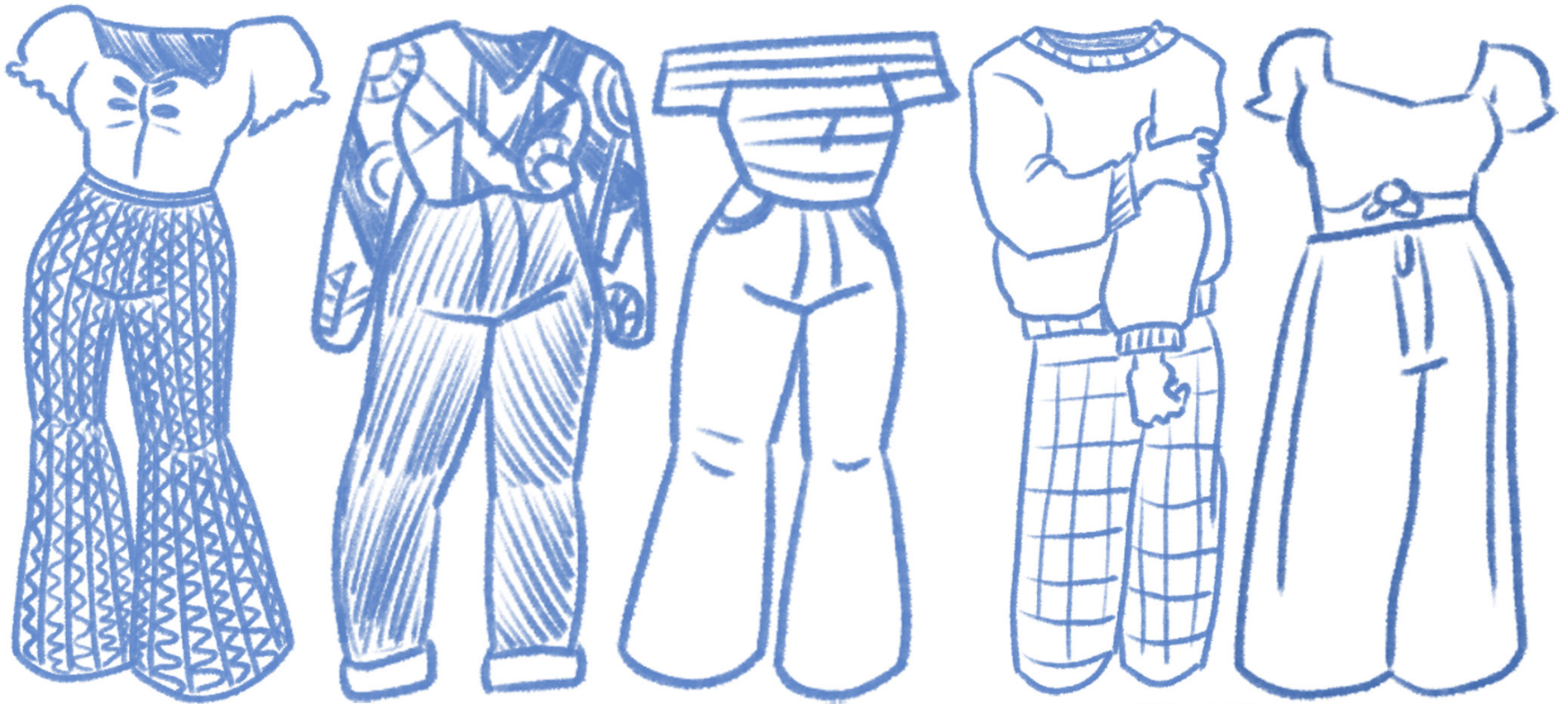




The main characters' clothing is largely based on the clothing I saw on young people around Mexico City. I sketched out some of my observations.

Angustias' uniform for MagX is meant to invoke the shape and collar of a priest's cassock with modern medical clothing (as her services often provide a type of healing), plus a touch of corporate tackiness. The same principles apply to Boti's professional wear earlier in the book.

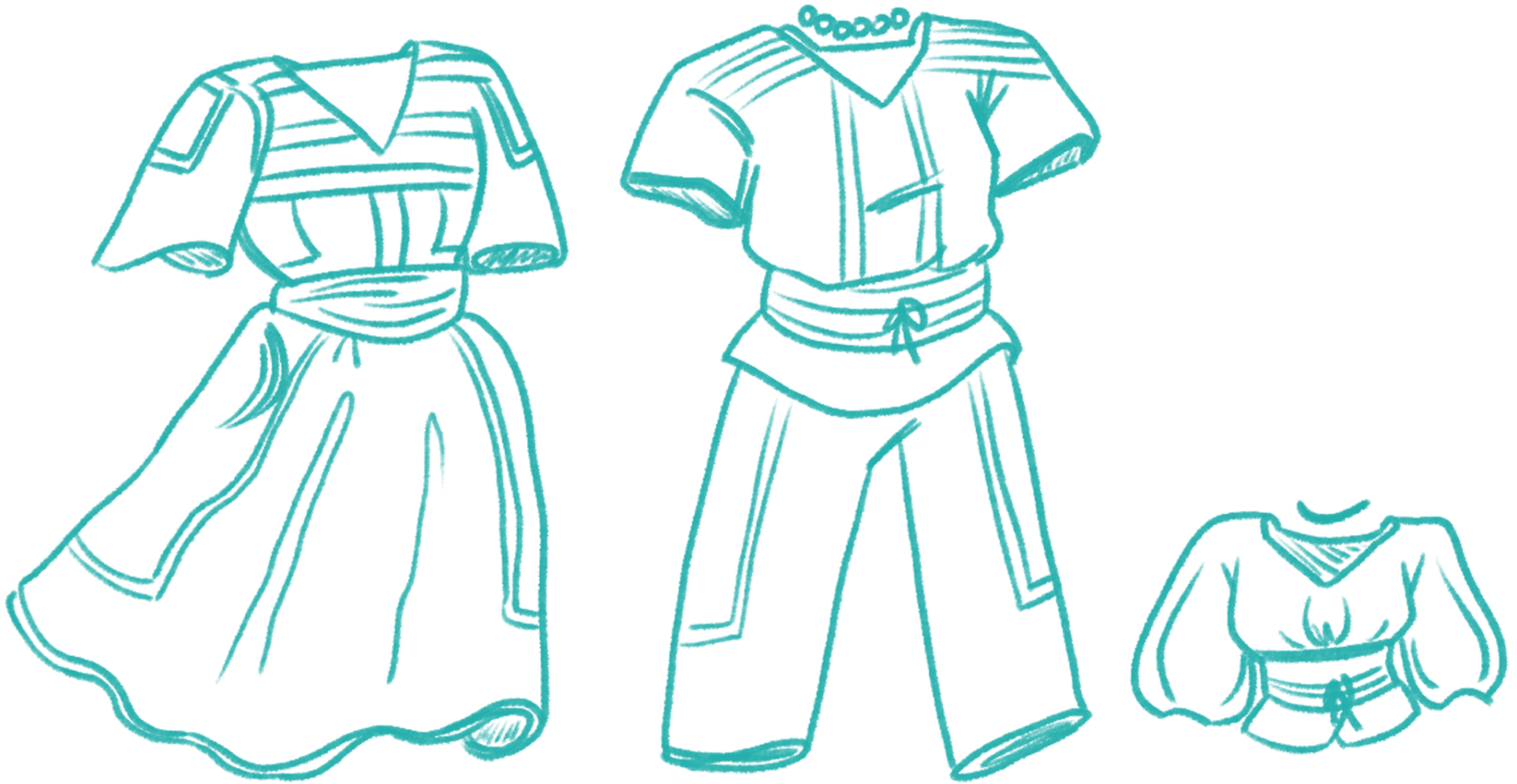


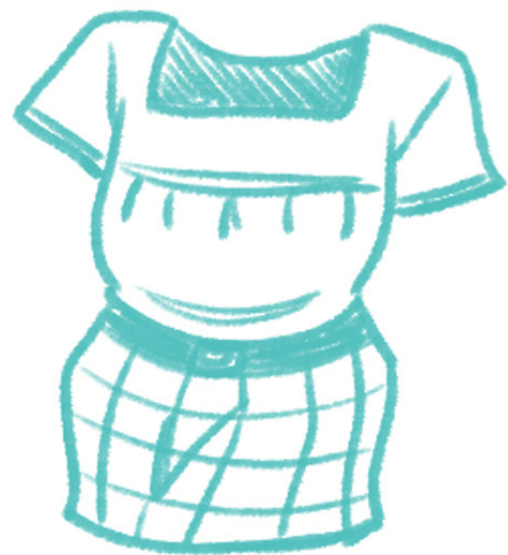


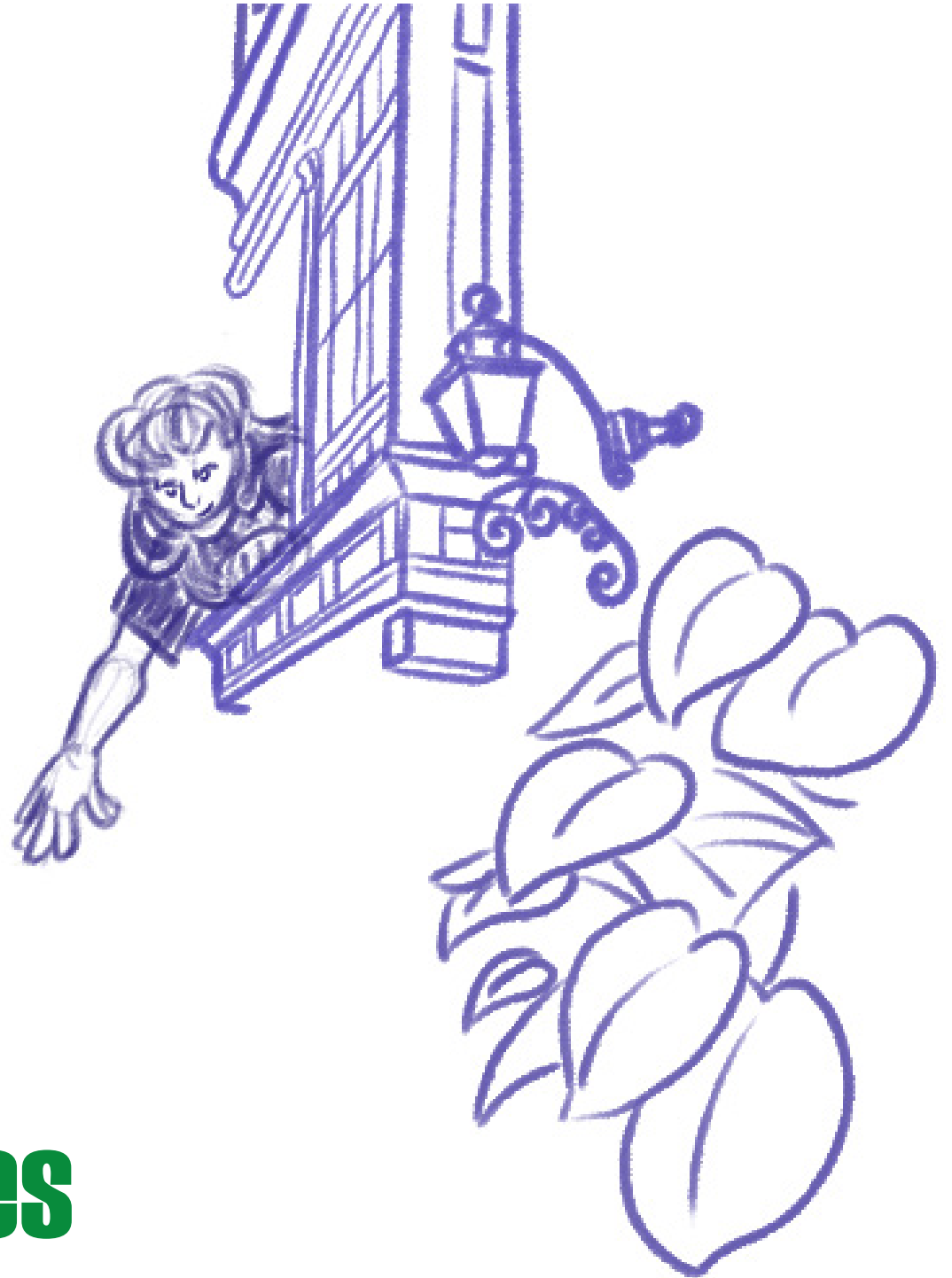
I modeled Angustias' outfits off much of the women's fashion I saw around the city. Fun colors, patterns, and 70's-and-80's styles were quite popular, usually in relatively (to the US) modest cuts. I thought this look would fit Angustias, as she is an optimist and cheerful person, but also one who tries not to go against the grain.



Varicela is a more revolutionary-minded counterpart to Angustias, with a resentment towards corporations and Eurocentrism. Consequently, her daily wear combines traditional patterns and cuts (primarily those from Chiapas and Tepoztlán) with the punk/goth style of certain Mexico City counterculture groups. The clothes she wears to perform rituals invoke the attire of traditional Mexican curanderos (witch doctors).







Episode Synopses

Ep 1- ¡La jefa quiere un aprendiz!

The introduction to our main characters, told primarily through Angustias' voiceover narration as she prepares for her work day. Angustias is a young woman studying magic in la Ciudad del Fina. She hopes to become a great witch someday. She lives in an apartment with her roommate Varicela, who she used to be really close with before, well.... She reflects that they both had a third best friend as well, Milagros¹, who died a year ago and who she misses terribly.

Biking to work, Angustias explains excitedly that she is an employee at MagX², the biggest magical company in Mexico. Not only that, but for the past few months she has been being mentored by its powerful magician CEO, Boti Carillo. Angustias doesn't think she's a great witch yet, but with this tutelage, she's confident she'll become one soon.

At work, Angustias hears gossip that the CEO, who no one but her has seen or knows the name of, is looking for an apprentice. Angustias decides she must become an apprentice, and therefore must find a way to prove herself. Later, during her one-on-one studies with Boti, Angustias realizes all her magic has been done following strict, pre-existing recipes. She decides that building her own potion might be the extra boost she needs.

Angustias stays late after Boti leaves doing personal potions research. When she returns home from work, she notices that Varicela is not in the apartment. She is confused, but doesn't think much of it and goes to bed.

Episode Notes

- 1) The three main characters' names each mean something in Spanish. Angustias means heartaches, Milagros means miracle. Both their names are real Hispanic first names. Varicela is not, but I find it funny that it sounds like a real woman's name. It means chickenpox.
- 2) MagX is named after the gender-neutral spelling of mago/a, mage in English.



Ep 2- Sobrecargado

For the past few days, Angustias has been exceptionally dedicated to her work at MagX, completing as many assignments as she can during the workday. These include providing an invisibility potion to a young couple who have only been able to communicate through the girl's bedroom window, as her father forbids her seeing the boy³. Angustias also spends a lot of time researching potions in the MagX labs, but is having no inspiration.

Angustias receives a house call for a *limpia*, a magical cleansing done to cure the sick⁴. A young man's sister called on behalf of her brother, who has shut himself up in his room for the past three days.

When Angustias arrives at the house, the mother is hostile to her, saying this is a moral household and she doesn't want magic anywhere near her son. Angustias is not surprised by this, and has a flashback to the field day the anti-magic press had after Milagros' death⁵. It is revealed that he was killed while working for MagX, in a ritual gone wrong. Angustias thinks angrily that Milagros himself wholeheartedly supported studying and spreading magic, and even in death would not condone its vilification.

Angustias finds the boy in his room, asleep at his desk, surrounded by mess and half-completed work. She talks with him and tries to do a healing ritual for him while he's lying there, but there is no visible effect. The boy explains that he's not sick, it's his life that's making him miserable⁶. Angustias ends up leaving him with a sleep potion, suggesting he take some time off work. She leaves feeling melancholy.

Later that night, Varicela is not home once again.

Episode Notes

- 3) The first assignment in this episode is based on the legend from Guanajuato, Mexico, el callejón del beso (kiss alley), in which two secret lovers communicate exclusively from balconies. <https://www.culturagenial.com/es/leyendas-mexicanas/>
- 4) Limpias are real spiritual practices done in Latin America, where a witch doctor performs a ceremony, often consisting of herbs, incense, and/or candles, to cure a sick person. <https://www.muyinteresante.com.mx/preguntas-y-respuestas/en-que-consiste-una-limpia-y-donde-proviene-el-culto/>
- 5) The element of an existing debate/panic on the morality of magic is based both on real-life attitudes and to the fact that in this story's world, the higher-ups aim to keep magic inaccessible to the masses and want to discourage its study and usage as much as possible.
- 6) Mexico has been found to have some of the highest work-related stress, including work addiction, poor work-life balance, and burnout, in the world. <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/english/mexico-high-work-stress>

Ep 3- Brebaje de Amor

Angustias is surprised when the next day she is sent to Varicela's place of work, the library at their old university. Instead of finding Varicela there, however, she finds her male coworker. He tells her he is in love with someone who doesn't reciprocate his feelings and asks if he can buy a love potion. Not knowing who Angustias is, he lets Varicela's name drop as the object of his affection.

Angustias is shocked and angrily refuses to sell him the potion. Thinking she is negotiating, he offers to show her where they keep the banned spell books in exchange. This makes her angrier, and she warns him to watch his mouth or she'll report him to the MagX higher-ups and have him sued. At his continued pleading for a love potion, she fills a bottle with Sangria soda while his back is turned and sells him that⁷.

Afterward, Angustias goes to the nearby witch market⁸ to stock up on ingredients. While she's there, she sees Varicela many aisles away. She tries to chase her but can't find her again. That night, Angustias confronts Varicela, asking her why she's practicing magic without a license. Varicela denies ever having been at the market. Angustias decides she is going to make a truth serum to find out what Varicela's up to.

Episode Notes

7) The assignment in this episode is loosely based on the legend from Aguascalientes, Mexico, la China Hilaria (likely, Hilaria, the mixed Amerindian/African woman) in which a man sells his soul to the devil to try to make a woman love him back, but still doesn't succeed. <https://www.culturagenial.com/es/leyendas-mexicanas/>

8) The idea of the existence of a witch market is based on Mercado Sonora in Mexico City. <https://www.thenotsoinnocentsabroad.com/blog/the-creepy-witchs-market-at-mercado-sonora>



Ep 4- Un escalofrío en el pasillo

Angustias searches the MagX resources for information on truth serum, but finds nothing. She has a flashback to her time at university, when her class learned about the implementation of strict magical codes in the previous decade which relegated the practice of most magic to trained professionals. This included the outright banning of certain potions to civilians, truth serum being among them. She reflects on whether she should continue her efforts, but decides that her position at MagX probably grants her certain privileges. However, she might need to go back to the library after all.

Work takes her to meet with a young American girl who is visiting her grandmother. The girl fears her grandma's house is haunted because she keeps feeling chills and seeing objects move on their own in the guest bedroom, but her grandma never witnesses such things and doesn't believe her. Angustias examines the house and determines that the grandma is likely protected from spirits by the plethora of religious objects⁹ she keeps everywhere but the guest room. Angustias creates a shrine in the guest room and tells the girl she should be safe now.

Later that evening, however, she gets a call from the girl again, this time with her grandma backing her up as well. Now, the house is experiencing a full-scale haunting, with slamming windows and rattling floorboards- anywhere the ghost can get to. Angustias panics, unsure of what to do. She stops Varicela on her way out and confides the situation to her. Variela scolds her for her handling of the haunting. The shrine, she explains, was a band-aid solution. She needed to communicate with the ghost and determine what it wants. Together, Angustias and Varicela go back to the house.

Ep 5- Amor prohibido, murmuran

At the house, Varicela helps Angustias and the clients prepare a ritual to talk to the ghost. They summon a young woman in old-fashioned clothing, and the grandma remembers her as her adolescent best friend, who she had a horrible falling out with after the grandma got married. The ghost wants to plead her forgiveness for her behavior, and confesses that she realizes now she had been in love with her. Everyone is shocked, but the grandmother is understanding. She forgives her, and tells her she will see her again in the next life. The ghost is able to move on.

After getting back, Angustias still can't fall asleep. She gets up and, in the middle of the night, sneaks back to the library. Shrouding herself in an invisibility spell for good measure, she searches for where the books might be hidden. Suddenly, across the room on the chalkboard, a drawing of a window appears. The drawing then swings open. Angustias sees none other than Varicela exit. Angustias watches in awe as she leaves, with a stack of books under her arm, then goes to the board and draws an open window for herself.

What Angustias finds inside is a small and dimly lit room lined with old filing cabinets, with stacks of books and folders also populating it. Hanging by the door, there is what looks like a check-out sheet, with a list of names next to various book titles. Angustias picks up a book from a stack, and notes it is a reference book on Magia Blanca¹⁰ from twelve years ago. She is briefly startled, but collects herself.

Angustias examines the file cabinets and finds the t's¹¹, flipping to where truth would be, and finding only a thin folder labeled Truth Serum Research. In it, she finds a number of handwritten sheets detailing the creator's trials and errors, as well as one with a list of ingredients titled Recipe (Incomplete). Angustias tucks the folder into her bag and promptly leaves¹².

Episode Notes

9) By “religious objects,” I am referring to the Catholic paraphernalia that decorates many Latino households. <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/9a/68/bd/9a68bd90b43d65e2dd76db81a1bf9269.jpg>

10) Magia blanca (white magic), is a term in brujeria that refers to magic used exclusively for healing and protection (in contrast with magia negra, black magic).

11) This should probably be “v’s,” for verdad, but I couldn’t decide.

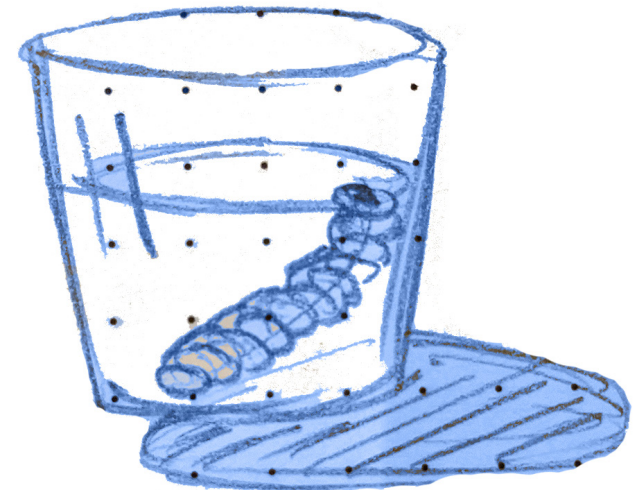
12) I wasn’t able to explore it much at this stage in the story, but if it’s not clear, this scene is meant to allude to the existence of an underground scene in la Ciudad, filled with people illegally studying magic for themselves. With one of its headquarters at the magic university, naturally Varicela and many of her coworkers are a part of it.

Ep 6- Perforando el Velo

At the lab, Angustias has put together everything she can of the potion, but nothing is coming from it. She tests a few drops by putting it into her coworker's coffee, and asking if she had gotten blackout drunk at their last employee party. When she calmly answers "no," Angustias is discouraged.

Work takes her out of the city, where she meets a woman about her age who has recently become the head of her family's mezcal business after her father's death¹³. She tells her that she does not have a problem to solve, but rather, a discovery to share. She has brewed a mezcal which, when the worm at the bottom of its bottle is consumed¹⁴, lets the drinker see into the world of the alebrijes¹⁵. She explains that when she eats it, she finds herself surrounded by the forest and creatures of myth.

She offers to let Angustias see for herself. Angustias is somewhat reluctant, wanting to get back home, but agrees to satisfy her customer. The girl pours Angustias a glass of mezcal, and drops a wriggling larva into it, noting that it staying alive during its descent indicates the quality of her brew. The women climb atop the roof and begin drinking¹⁶.



Episode Notes

13) The brewing of mezcal (an alcohol similar to tequila, made from maguey), can be highly personal in Mexico, with some bottles listing the precise neighborhood in which they were brewed, and that neighborhood having a particular taste. It is a family business for many, particularly in the areas surrounding Mexico City. <https://www.mezcalistas.com/salvadores-mezcal-reviving-a-family-tradition/>

14) Many mezcal brands have what is called a “mezcal worm” (actually a moth larva) at the bottom of their bottle, with explanations ranging from it demonstrating the mezcal’s purity (if the worm doesn’t die on its way to the bottom), demonstrating the high alcohol content (if the worm is preserved), or changing the mezcal’s chemistry. There are also myths that say, if eaten, the worms have hallucinogenic and/or aphrodisiac properties. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xywvnn/that-worm-at-the-bottom-of-your-mezcal-isnt-a-lie-1>

15) Alebrijes are mythical animals featured in Mexican folk art, typically in the form of paper or cardboard statues. The creatures are brightly-colored combinations of multiple different animals. Their concept originated in 1943 with the Mexico City artist Pedro Linares, who told the story of being sick and dreaming of a strange forest containing unknown, fantastical animals. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alebrije>

Ep 7- Una noche bien fría

Many years ago, in Chispas¹⁷, a ten-year old Milagros is lost in the mountains, and the sun is setting. As he continues searching for the town, and becomes more and more desperate, a large dog suddenly emerges from the bushes. At first, Milagros is scared, and tries to walk away without exciting it. The dog follows him, however, continually running in front of him and quietly barking, trying to get his attention. Eventually, Milagros begins to follow it, to the dog's contentment¹⁸.

The dog leads him deeper into the woods, and further up the mountain. Soon, he sees a house, glowing warmly atop a peak. The dog leads him to it. There, Milagros meets the woman who lives there, a witch. She takes him in, makes him tea, and shows him around. Her house is teeming with magical tools and her own creations. Then she tells him she must return to her work, and shows him that she has a sick man staying with her that she is working to cure with her magic. Milagros is in awe at her kindness.

The witch puts an amulet around his neck for protection, and has the dog guide him back down the mountain to his town. Back home, Angustias and Varicela had been terrified that he had been spirited away by a witch. When Milagros regales them with his story and his newfound love for witchcraft, they all develop a passion for the study.

Another flashback to the previously-remembered university lesson on banned potions, including truth serum. The professor continues on to explain that even if they were legal, they would be highly discouraged, as magical laws work so that one must be prepared to have done back to them any action they take against others¹⁹.

Episode Notes

16) The plot of this episode is based on a similar one in an anime that greatly inspired mine, Mushi-Shi. In the first episode of its second season, Banquet at the Forest's Edge, a brewer of the Japanese rice wine sake accidentally creates a brew that lets him see the ethereal supernatural creatures mushi. The episode ends with a shot of the man sitting on his roof and watching them float by, an image that has stuck with me for many years.

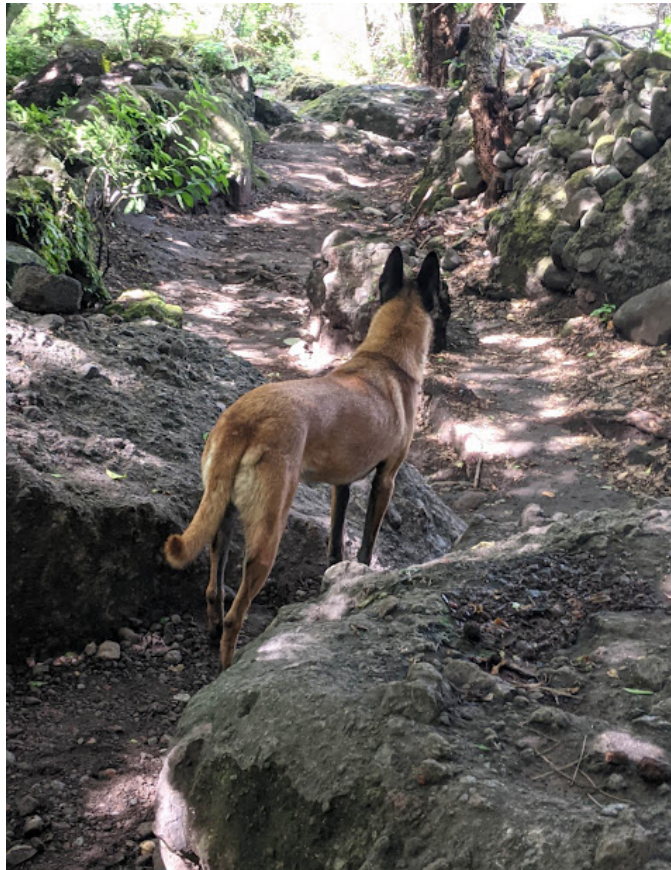
17) The word chispa in Spanish means “spark,” though the town name is a reference to the Mexican state of Chiapas.

18) I had to include this guide dog in my story, because my roommate and I actually encountered one while hiking in the town of Tepoztlán. On our way across the town to the mountain, we picked up a tag-along, assuming she was a stray dog who would simply leave eventually. She did not, but rather stayed with us our entire hike, occasionally going ahead or wandering off, but always eventually returning. Even as we found ourselves without data and slightly lost, we realized we could reliably follow the dog, ultimately all the way back to the town. Upon return, the dog happily went back to her master's house, who informed us her dog loves guiding people and does it all the time. It was quite the real life magical experience.

19) This was an idea that I indeed found frequently repeated in my studies on Mexican witchcraft. Says one shaman in the Vice documentary *Between God & The Devil: Mexico's Land of Sorcerers*: “When someone comes to me, I ask them to be sure of what they ask for. Because the one who pays might see what he asked for be reversed onto him tomorrow.”



Paper alebrijes from the Mexican market Ciudadela



Pictures from the Tepoztlán hike

Ep 8- La Verdad Te Hará Libre

Angustias wakes up as night is falling with tears in her eyes, still on the roof with the client (now sleeping) and an empty glass next to her. Angustias wakes the woman, and tells her she didn't see anything to do with alebrijes. The woman is embarrassed, confessing that she must have been mistaken, because while she did dream she was back in the forest, she also found her father this time. Her father had been an artist and storyteller who created alebrije paper sculptures, and would often embellish the hikes they took with stories of the creatures. Therefore, it couldn't be a view into another world.

Angustias assures her that her discovery is by no means useless, however, if it can bring forth images from one's psyche so immediately and vividly. She privately wonders, in fact, if this could contain the secret to her truth serum. Angustias pays the woman for several bottles of mezcal and worms, and takes the late bus back home. She spends the night at her lab working tirelessly, until she finally pours a shimmering golden liquid from her vial, and feels in her gut that this is the serum.

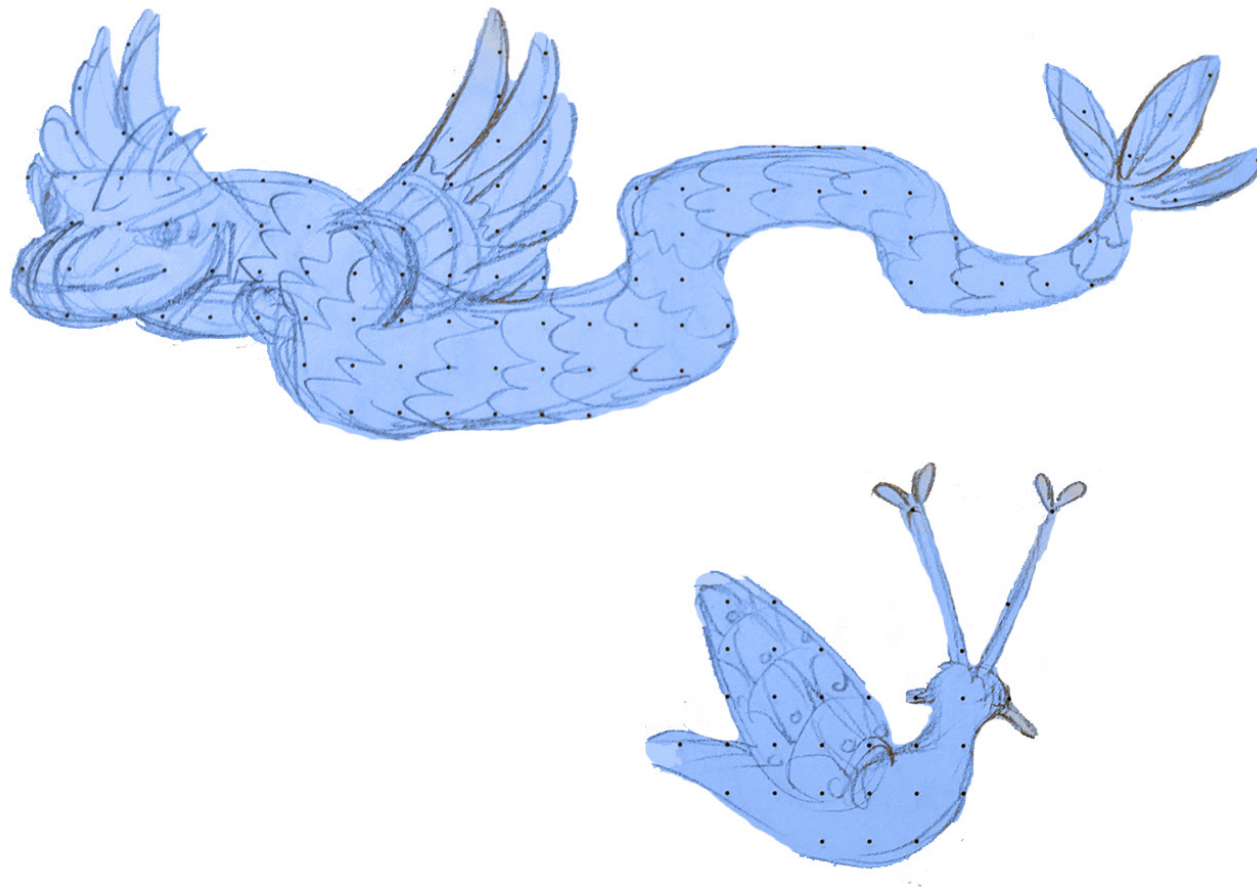
Angustias gets to her apartment just as Varicela is waking up, and slips a few drops of the serum into her tea. Varicela can tell she's been drugged immediately, and tries to run away, but Angustias corners her. When she realizes she's trapped, Varicela tackles Angustias.

As they're struggling, at Angustias' prompting, Varicela confesses to doing magic without a license, hoarding banned books, and researching illegal spells, but defends that she's not alone in this. Angustias tells her she's putting her job at risk, to which Varicela responds good, because she hates Boti. Varicela manages to pin Angustias down and retrieve the truth serum from her pocket, smearing some un-

der Angustias' nose. Angustias confesses to finding out about the library's secret room, then demands again to know what Varicela has been up to.

Finally, Varicela admits that she has been planning a ritual to try to talk to Milagros. Angustias is hurt that she doesn't trust her enough to involve her, and Varicela assures her that she trusts her more than anyone, but doesn't want to put her in danger. Both end up crying, and admitting to missing the other.

Angustias asks if she can participate in the ritual with Varicela. After some thinking, Varicela agrees. They go to Milagros' old room, and Varicela sets up the tools. They try to reach him, but have no luck. Angustias dejectedly decides she should go to work, taking the remainder of the truth potion with her.



Ep 9- Pero Primero Te Hará Miserable

Still at the apartment, Varicela realizes that she may be trying to reach Milagros in the wrong place. She gathers her supplies, and rushes out to catch the nearest bus to Chispas.

Angustias arrives at work. Boti is upset with her for being late, and Angustias explains that she was up late working on her own potion. She presents the truth serum to Boti. Boti is shocked, and does not seem particularly pleased. She calmly tells Angustias that she should not have created this, but she thanks her for giving it to her so she can dispose of it. Put off, Angustias asks if she can have it back, to which Boti refuses.

Angustias tries to take it from her, but finds herself slumping forward mid-lunge, suddenly stunned. Boti picks her up and takes her to her office.

Meanwhile, Varicela has arrived in Chispas, at the foot of the mountain where Milagros was once helped by the witch. She prepares her ritual for speaking to the dead.

Angustias wakes up from being stunned, now tied to a chair in Boti's office, to find Boti waving the truth serum bottle under her nose. For the second time today, she is compelled. Boti asks her what she knows, and why she made this, and Angustias explains that she only wanted to earn the role of her apprentice. Appeased, Boti decides that she will simply erase Angustias' memory of having created the serum, and leaves to collect the spell materials from her lab.

In Chispas, Varicela's ritual succeeds. Milagros appears before her, and they have a tearful reunion. He explains to her that she was right to not trust Boti, that his death at MagX wasn't an accident, but a planned murder by the company. As Varicela is reeling with shock and anger, Milagros tells her of Angustias' current situation, sending her over the edge into blind rage.

At the lab, Boti is finalizing her preparation to wipe Angustias' memory, when Boti is suddenly overcome with a full-body shudder. She begins to vomit uncontrollably, before collapsing to the floor. Varicela, having completed a teleportation spell under Milagros' guidance, appears in the lab.

Ep 10- Al Mal Tiempo, Buena Cara

Varicela rescues Angustias and ties Boti up in her place. Then, as Boti regains consciousness, Varicela administers the truth serum and begins her interrogation for Angustias to witness.

Boti confesses to all. In his time at MagX, Milagros had seen the incentive the higher-ups had to keep magic accessible to only a select few. That way, they were able to both use magic for their own gain, frequently at the expense of those around them, and keep the public reliant on their services. As he tried to spread magical knowledge, he became at odds with Boti, and he sealed his fate when he threatened to make her identity public. Exposed to the people, she would be vulnerable to all she had unfairly gained being thrown back at her, a risk she couldn't take.

Angustias is heartbroken at the realization that all she's been working for, and the mentor she trusted, was a lie. Varicela assures her that her work has not been for nothing, and guides her out of the building.

In the following days, both Boti and Varicela have been arrested. MagX is still up and running, and a replacement CEO is already being searched for. Varicela and Angustias know that there is too much corruption in la Ciudad for this one event to have changed things, but Angustias has a newfound sense of purpose.

In the final scene, Angustias visits the facility Varicela is being kept at. With chalk, she draws an elaborate doorway on the wall, and Varicela steps out of it²⁰.

Episode Notes

20) The final scene of the season, along with the earlier scene of Angustias' entrance into the secret library room, are based on the legend from Veracruz, Mexico, la Mulata de Córdoba (the mulatto woman from Cordoba) (apologies for the many racially charged legend titles). In this story, a beautiful woman is arrested for witchcraft, but on the night before she is to die, she draws a realistic ship on the prison wall with charcoal. Then, she sails away in it, never to be seen again. <https://topadventure.com/cultura/La-Mulata-de-Cordoba-una-leyenda-de-Veracruz-20220426-0001.html>



“Escena de La mulata de Córdoba” (1898) by Julio Ruelas

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Adobe InDesign

QniPaint

