

# Gerbils

*K. Phelps*

“How many times do I have to tell you to turn off the gerbils?!”

“But Flour loves the gerbils!”

Mian ran a hand through her hair as she followed the sound of the argument to frazzled Poinsettia’s home, where a swarm of rodents were currently in the process of destroying her garden while she argued with her little daughter Lu about it. The smell of damaged herbs filled the air, rosemary and basil. Their orange-speckled white cat sat in audience on a wide flat rock overlooking the whole spectacle, like a severely-overfed lump of dough in the sun.

“Mian!” Poinsettia said, reaching for her with desperate hands, “Help!”

A small rift in space was slit under the rosemary. Another gerbil squeezed through it, sniffing through this wonderland of food. The early summer warmth welcomed the newcomer to stay as long it liked.

Mian leaned on her staff as she took in the plight of the poor herbs and vegetables, the ash wood polished more by her hands now than its original varnish. She wished she could commend Lu for her ingenuity in threading space to give every gerbil she could find direct access to her home, but—well. She flicked her staff to zip up the portal so that no more of the rodents could come through as she said, “I’m not sorting through them again. This time I’m just going to send them back, and they’ll end up wherever they end up.”

“What?!” Lu screeched, wildly waving the little ash branch that had found her in the concrete city, “No! They won’t be able to go home!”

“They’ll go to *a* gerbil’s home.”

“But it won’t be theeeirs!”

“Then how about you do it?”

Lu clammed up. Happy to throw her toys all over the floor, but not so happy to put them away.

Mian twirled her staff in her hands as she stepped closer to the portal.

“No!”

“*Lu*,” Poinsettia snapped, at her wit’s end, which made the noise stop for a moment at the cost of Lu flinching away from her mother.

“We could leave the portal open,” Mian said calmly, which earned her suspicious looks from both Poinsettia and Lu, “I know some snakes who *love* gerbils. Even more than Flour does!”

The cat glanced at her.

Lu blinked, figured it out, and began to wail.

“*Or*,” Mian said, “You can send them all back home and help your mom fix your garden.”

Lu fought back her tears and got to work rerouting the portal.

Mian helped her a little, but not too much.