



Whisker While You Work (Magic and Mayhem Universe)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: The Pied Pipers past is about to catch up with him. Will it be Glory who pays the price?

It turns out running a cat café and navigating a new situationship with the Pied Piper is harder than Glory thought. Shes got an idea to get the café back in the black, but shes less sure of where she stands with the towns hottest thief.

Things get more complicated when someone sends the Pied Piper a message in the form a rat. A real, live, actually kind of cute rat. And thanks to one questionable decision on Glorys part, where one rat is, more quickly follow.

Now Glory has to throw a kids princess birthday party. If she can pull it off while dealing with a rat-pocalypse, a secretive kind-of boyfriend, and escalating threats from a mysterious stranger, she just might be able to save her business.

Provided, of course, she survives it.

Total Pages (Source): 23

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

When I tell people that I own and operate a cat café, the very first thing they usually say to me is, “Wow, that sounds amazing! I can’t believe you can make a living doing that.”

And the truth is...you can’t.

Or maybe some people can. Maybe there are cat café owners out there wearing socks without holes in the heels and driving cars where you don’t need to blast the heat in the summer because your coolant is leaking and if you don’t pull the heat from the engine, the whole thing will overheat.

That is not me. It turns out I am as good at running a business as I am at magic, or making sound decisions, or all of the other things I am not good at.

This was particularly frustrating because I have such a range of experience working for successful businesses.

Back home, I was a receptionist at a popular dentist. I made pizzas at a pizza place that was always packed.

I even worked at a witchy little antique shop that should never have worked but somehow just did.

The big problem was that I was peddling baked goods, which, it turns out, are practically time bombs.

Baked goods start going stale the moment they come out of the oven.

I know, I know—I'm being dramatic. Obviously, my cupcakes are moist and delicious well after they're baked.

But the timer has started. No one wants old cupcakes.

I was able to extend the moistness and deliciousness through a little magic here and there, but it backfired almost as much as it worked.

Also, while my reviews were mostly great, I'd gotten my first negative review recently, and since I didn't have a ton of reviews, it brought down the average quite a bit. Of course, this particular negative review didn't help.

One star: A cat farted in my face.

Yes, that happened. I wished the reviewer had mentioned that the café section is separated from the cat section. It wasn't like Jojo, the café's gassiest resident, had released a malodorous cloud onto a cupcake or anything like that.

But I wasn't thinking about bad reviews or errant spells that left pastel streaks in my hair. I was thinking about a necklace. A small silver necklace shaped like half a heart.

I stood in the bathroom of my apartment, fumbling with the clasp.

I finally got it on, then stared at myself in the mirror.

I was supposed to wear the necklace, right?

Horst had given it to me, and I wanted to wear it.

But maybe he'd meant it as a joke? It was exactly the kind of joke he'd make—"Hey, Glory O'Bryan. I got you this BFF necklace. LOL."

What if he saw me wearing it and realized I was more into him than he was into me? Or what if it wasn't just a joke and I didn't wear it and he assumed I wasn't into him and—

My phone rang out in my living room. Maybe it would be Horst and he would be like, “Hey, just a heads up. I’m going to be wearing my BFF necklace today, and I really hope you’re wearing yours,” and then I would know what I was supposed to do.

But when I hurried out to the living room, I saw it wasn't Horst. It was a Facetime call from Roger, my therapist back in West Virginia.

Slipping the little heart necklace under my shirt, I hit the answer button. “Hey, Roger.”

“Good morning, Glory. Today’s the big day, isn’t it?”

“I mean, it’s a somewhat significant day.” That was a lie. It was a huge day. Like maybe the most important day in the history of my business since I opened it.

“That’s a healthy way to look at it.” Roger squinted at the screen. “Your hair looks...colorful.”

I really, really hated it that Roger could tell how I was handling things just by looking at how much of my hair I’d accidentally turned unicorn-colored. I tried to smile like it was no big deal, but it felt stiff and unnatural. “A couple minor mishaps.”

“You always say that.”

“Because it’s always true.” I tucked my hair behind my ear, hoping that reduced how obvious my magical misfires were. “Roger, when will I be done with therapy?”

He sat back in his chair. “When I say you are.”

“Considering I pay you, that feels like a conflict of interest.”

“Keeping my patients captive is my strategy for business success,” he said, nose twitching ever so slightly. “Just like yours is going to be birthday parties.”

I blew out a breath. That was my big idea—hosting birthday parties.

Gallows Bay already had the Enchanted Forest, the quirky fairy tale-themed park on the outskirts of town, and the Wild Rose , the floating museum dedicated to the famed pirate hunter Ichabod Frowd, the man who defeated the Butcher of the Carolinas.

So I had some competition for coolest birthday party spot. But while I might not have castles or cannons, I did have kittens and cupcakes.

And if I could just land one birthday party booking, everyone in town would see how much fun a party at Purrates Café could be.

Which was why I really, really needed my meeting with the prospective party client to go well. And it would! I had baked samples of some of my most popular cake flavors, and I had all kinds of ideas for themes, and just as long as nothing went wrong, I was going to book my first birthday party.

Not that anything would go wrong.

Although...something could go wrong. Maybe I should have asked my prospect what flavors she liked best. Or maybe I should have had her come in when the café was open so she could see people enjoying it. Although what if no one came in and then she saw how sad and pathetic my business really was—

“Glory,” Roger said gently. “You look like you’re spiraling.”

“I’m not spiraling.”

I definitely was.

“This is why I haven’t told you you’re ready to stop therapy yet. Just because you have a boyfriend now—”

“Roger!” I hissed, looking around frantically to make sure Horst hadn’t managed to break into my apartment without me realizing it.

Sorry—he preferred “let himself in” to “break in.”

“Break in” sounded like he was a criminal. Which he actually kind of was.

Emphasis on the “kind of.”

“What’d I say?” Roger asked.

“He’s not my”—I lowered my voice—“boyfriend.” My hand crept to the almost imperceptible bump under my shirt that was the heart-shaped necklace. “We’re BFFs.”

“BFFs?” Roger’s brow crinkled. “Buddies who French and Fuc—”

“Roger ! BFF has never stood for that. You know that.”

A teeny smile played around the corners of his mouth. “Oh? Then what does it stand for?”

“Best Friends Forever.”

“Interesting.” Roger rubbed his pale hands together, clearly deep in thought. “Is that really what it means?”

“Of course. Everyone knows that.”

He arched one sandy eyebrow. “Do they?”

Oh. He was doing a therapist thing. And he had a point. Horst might have called us BFFs, but what did that actually mean to him? After the time we’d spent together—mainly in my bedroom, but also on the couch, and a little bit in the kitchen—I would say “best” definitely applied, at least to Horst.

Like...super best.

And we were friends. Weren’t we?

Which left the last F.

Forever .

Yeah, I had some trouble seeing that. Given Horst’s propensity to pop in without warning, he certainly didn’t seem like someone who would want to spend forever with anyone.

He was more of a free spirit. A man on a mission, and honestly a pretty noble one at that—finding a way to turn a bunch of fairy lizard things back into the medieval German children they once were.

I felt my cheeks grow warm. Was I the biggest idiot in the world, falling for that

story? Was he meeting up with guy friends in a bar somewhere, saying, “Wait until you hear what I got this chick I’m seeing to believe”?

I blinked, focusing on Roger’s face on the screen. “Hey, my meeting is in about ten minutes and I still need to get set up.”

Roger gave me a somewhat awkward thumbs up. “You got this, Glory.”

“I know.”

As soon as I hung up, I reached up and, with shaking fingers, undid the clasp of the necklace. I held it in my hand for a moment, then left it behind on the coffee table as I went down to the café to get ready.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

The woman who entered the café a little while later might have been my potential birthday party client, or she might have just gotten lost on her way to a Vogue fashion spread photoshoot.

You know how when you see models in fashion magazines, they're always wearing clothes that you imagine would look ridiculous in real life?

Like they're trying way too hard to look good?

Not this woman. She just made it look like I wasn't trying hard enough. Everything about her, from her sharply pointed heels and her tailored green slacks to the white blouse with an oversized collar, looked sleek and sophisticated and like it should never, ever be covered in cat hair.

All my optimism drained away. Maybe she'd misunderstood my website. Maybe she thought I was some avant-garde art gallery or a winery or something and that's why she'd called to discuss booking a party.

But then a little girl emerged from behind the maybe-fashion model, her eyes lighting up as she looked around.

The kid was maybe six, and dressed almost as beautifully as the woman was, but when she saw the cats perched in the window of the cat area, she quivered with sheer joy. "Mommy, look! Kitties!"

The woman pushed her sunglasses up and flashed me what managed to be a very sophisticated grin. "Hi, I'm Julia, and this is Andi," she said, extending one hand.

“This place is perfect .”

“Thank you. I’m so glad you like it.” This was going better than I’d hoped. Already Andi was pressed up against the window between the café and the cat area, making soft cooing noises at Jojo, whose gas problem was, fortunately, obscured by the glass between us.

“And I love your apron,” Julia said. “Did your kids make that for you?”

“I don’t have any kids.”

“Ah.” Julia nodded, her grin fading. “I see. Well, anyway, it’s...cute.”

I glanced down at the bedazzled cat face on my apron. I guessed it did look kind of like kids had made it.

But no kids had been involved.

This was all me.

I had bedazzled the crap out of that apron. I had actually bedazzled the crap out of all my aprons. Because once you start bedazzling, it’s very hard to stop.

A problem Julia clearly never experienced.

She and I stood there in silence for a moment, while Jojo batted at Andi’s fingers from the other side of the glass, making the little girl squeal with delight.

Say something, Glory. Be cool. You can do this.

But it was Julia who smoothed over the awkwardness. Waving one hand toward the

cake samples I had set out, she said, “This looks amazing. I can’t wait to get a taste.”

“Yes,” I said, lurching into action, certain my apron was making me sparkle away with every move I made.

Like a disco ball that bakes and likes cats.

“Why don’t you have a seat?” I said, pulling out a chair for her and wincing as the chair legs emitted a sharp shriek against the tile floor.

You. Got. This.

And I did. Because I might look like a disaster, and my chairs might not know how to behave themselves in front of company, but, by golly, I could bake. Which was what was going to win Julia over.

Well, that and the cats, who were doing their damndest to be extra cool for Andi’s benefit.

“I can do pretty much any flavor you’d like, but these are some of my most popular.” I ran through the flavors I’d selected, while Julia picked up a fork in her slim fingers and began delicately sampling bites from the slivers of cake.

“These are wonderful,” she said, dabbing at the corners of her lips with a napkin and managing not to get even a ghost of a lipstick print on the napkin.

“I think right now we’ve narrowed down the location to here or the Enchanted Forest. It’s kind of a tough call because her two greatest loves are cats and princesses. ”

All my confidence evaporated. Julia was going to choose the Enchanted Forest for Andi’s party, and I was never going to book my first birthday party, and I was going

to have to close the café, and Jojo the farting cat was going to end up living in an animal shelter forever, and I was going to have to live in my car, running the heat all the time so it didn't blow up.

As Roger would say, I was spiraling.

And then it hit me.

“Princesses!” I squeaked out. Julia cocked her head, and even Andi abandoned the cats in the window to stare curiously at me.

I cleared my throat and folded my hands together on the table, willing myself to relax.

“We could do a princess-themed party here,” I said, impressed with how calm and even my voice sounded.

Like I wasn't on the verge of a breakdown.

I imagined Julia's future review.

Five stars: The owner didn't come off as unhinged at all.

Andi bounced up and down. “Cats and princesses?”

What would a princess-themed party look like? Pink streamers? Paper crowns? I stole another glance at Julia and decided a few paper products weren't going to cut it.

No matter—I'd figure it out.

Then Andi grabbed my arm, her freckled face shining. “Can you get Princess

Palollipop to come to my party?”

I had no idea who Princess Palollipop was, but from the blog posts I’d read on business success, I knew the only answer here was to say yes and figure out how to make it happen later.

“Absolutely,” I said, hoping I looked confident.

“The real Princess Palollipop? Not just you in a dress.”

“Um...” I looked to Julia, hoping her face would give me some hint as to what I was dealing with. But she was currently absorbed in licking some caramel frosting off her fork—without, I might add—smearing it all over her mouth.

Not that that’s what would happen to me. It’s just...

That’s what would happen to me.

I looked around at the café area. It was light and airy, with creamy walls and wrought-iron tables and pops of sun-kissed citrus colors here and there.

I loved this place. I loved finally getting to bake for a living, and I loved knowing I was making a difference in the lives of the rescue cats who found homes through the café, and I loved the people of Gallows Bay, who, one-star reviewer aside, had been so friendly and welcoming.

If I wanted to keep my café, I needed this party. I needed it desperately.

I leaned closer to Andi and smiled. “The real Princess Palollipop. I promise.”

How hard could that be to make happen?

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

As it turned out, harder than I expected.

Apparently, Princess Palollipop was a cartoon, which was something I really wished I'd known before I promised a six-year-old I'd get the real Palollipop for her birthday.

She lived in a cloud castle, and loved candy and fluffy bunny slippers and a peach-colored otter named, of all things, Gananagins.

But I supposed Disney World got away with supplying three-dimensional people to portray their animated princesses, so after Julia signed the contract and left, taking a box of the remaining samples with her, I put on my proverbial girl-boss hat and got to work.

An internet search gave me a list of people to contact, which I started on immediately. Out of the six people I called, two were already booked for the day of Andi's party, three didn't do Palollipop, and one was eight and a half months pregnant.

"I can try," she said, sounding slightly out of breath. "But I can't guarantee I won't go into labor before the party. Or during the party, for that matter."

I thanked her for considering it but politely declined. I did not want a future review that included the word "afterbirth."

I let my head fall onto the table in front of me, the wrought iron cool under my forehead.

I counted to ten, giving myself a few seconds to fret, and then I sat up again.

I'd only called six people. There had to be more entertainers in the area.

I would just have to keep calling people until I found someone with a poufy pink dress who was available for Andi's party. That was all.

I gathered the plates from the sampling and carried them through the swinging door into the back. I set them down by the sink, stripped off my bedazzled apron—making a mental note to find something a little more upscale for the party—and then started washing the dishes.

It was all going to be okay, I told myself as I worked.

I was going to locate the perfect Princess Palollipop, and Andi was going to have an amazing party.

Maybe then some of her friends would want to have their birthday parties at the café, too.

Or Julia could tell her mom friends—I pictured her casually sipping some overpriced wine at the fancy seafood place I still hadn't tried, gushing about how much fun Andi's party was while her similarly elegant friends made notes on their phones.

It could happen!

The slight scraping sound at the window behind me made me smile, a little flare of warmth shooting through me.

There was only one person who entered the café through that window—Horst. My.

..well, as I'd told Roger, not my boyfriend.

But whatever he was to me, he was sexy as hell.

And while I would have really appreciated it if he would just, you know, use the door like a normal person, part of his charm was the fact that he wasn't like anybody else I knew.

Which meant accepting that he would go on showing up unannounced in my window rather than arranging to see me via text.

"I thought you'd drop in," I said, rinsing off the last plate. "And I have some very exciting news. I thought you might want to help me celebrate." I set the plate in the dish rack, grabbed a nearby towel, and began drying my hands as I turned to face him.

Only Horst wasn't there. The window was empty.

I glanced around, wondering if this was a new trick. Maybe he was hiding somewhere, ready to pop out and surprise me?

But no, there was no one else in the kitchen.

A little shivery feeling ran down my spine, and my arms prickled as goosebumps broke out over my skin. I didn't feel alone—and not in a comforting way.

Then I heard the smallest of sounds, a tiny scratching noise, and looked toward the window. Horst wasn't there, no, but there was a small white box sitting on the sill just inside. A small white box with a series of holes punched in the side facing me.

Maybe this was another of Horst's surprises? It wouldn't be the first time he'd left a

gift for me.

Though, in the past, none of his gifts made noise.

Steeling myself, I walked over to the window and picked up the box. It wasn't very heavy, though there was definitely something in there. A tag dangled from the top. In blood-red ink, it read, "For the Pied Piper."

It should have hit me immediately that the gift was for Horst and not from Horst, but I was already reaching for the lid of the box, too eager to see what Horst had left for me on this very important day.

I pulled back the lid and found myself staring into a pair of beady eyes.

It was a rat.

A real, live rat.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

I'm not a huge fan of rodents, especially rats. But as I stared down into the box, immobile with shock, I realized that the creature inside had tensed up, whiskers trembling, its furry body practically shrinking in on itself.

It was terrified.

Well, that made two of us.

But realizing the rat was just as scared helped a little.

I took a breath and studied it, as though that might provide some explanation for what it was doing in my kitchen.

The rat was white with splotches of pale butterscotch, and as I watched it lifted its front paws and held them close to its little face, almost as if it were praying.

And honestly, it wasn't cute, exactly, but it wasn't not-cute, either.

"It's okay," I told the rat, slowly closing the lid of the box so it wouldn't escape.

A rat in a box was one thing. A rat loose in the kitchen of my café was quite another.

"Glory O'Bryan. A little bird told me you'd had a good day, so I brought you something to celebrate."

I looked up to find Horst leaping into the window, his hair tousled over his forehead in that way that made me kind of stupid.

There was something otherworldly about him, which made sense given he was half-fae.

His honey-colored eyes glimmered as they took in my face, then dropped to the box in my hand, where the tag with the words “For the Pied Piper” was visible.

“Oh. You got me something, too?”

“It’s a rat,” I said, still struggling to wrap my mind around this unexpected—and very weird—gift.

He squinted slightly, his head cocking to one side. “Huh. I got you tacos.” He lifted one hand, which gripped a white bag. “I don’t know where a rat falls on the spectrum of gifts. Did I overbuy or underbuy?”

“It’s not from me,” I said, holding the box out for him to take. “Someone left it here.”

“Ah.” Horst set his bag of tacos down on a nearby counter.

He moved carefully, purposefully, as though he had some concerns about this development but didn’t want to alarm me.

I watched his face take on the cocky, flirtatious look that was part of the mask he usually wore in public to keep people from seeing the real him.

Not that the real him wasn’t also cocky and flirtatious. It was just different somehow.

“Alive or dead?”

“I—” I broke off, staring at him. “What?”

“Sending someone a rat seems like a message, doesn’t it? I assume the message is different depending on whether the rat is alive or dead.”

Did I want to think too hard about the fact that the guy I was currently in a BFF situation with felt there was a chance someone might send him a dead rat?

No. No, I did not.

“What would it mean if the rat was alive?” I asked.

He pursed his lips, deep in thought. “I suppose a living rat could mean, ‘Hey, you’re a rat.’ Or it might say, ‘I heard you would good at caring for small creatures and needed a good home for my pet.’”

Somehow I didn’t think it was the latter. “And a dead rat?”

“Oh, well, that could mean, ‘I’d like to help you with your pest control needs and here’s a pre-dead rat to show you how good I am.’ Or it could mean, ‘I meant to give you a living rat but didn’t poke enough airholes in the box.’”

His fingers fidgeted at his sides, and I knew he was thinking about another possibility. “Or?” I asked.

He shrugged, and even though I was worried about the rat situation, I was still able to appreciate the way his muscles shifted under his shirt with the movement. He was complicated, yes, but... those muscles .

“I suppose it could mean, ‘You’re next.’” His eyes clouded briefly, but then he snapped his fingers and flashed me a grin that could do whatever the female equivalent of launching a thousand ships is. “But I see there’s plenty of airholes in that box, so I assume that rat is still alive.”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re a regular Sherlock Holmes?”

He flashed me another grin as he took the box from me carefully. “Not really. But then, Sherlock Holmes was the kind of guy who solved crimes. I’m more the kind of guy who commits them.”

I watched as he lifted the lid just enough that he could peek inside.

“Hello there,” he said, his voice soft. Movement in his shirt pocket caught my eye, and I saw Oomy, Horst’s purple shapeshifting kobold, pop her head out to see what was going on.

When she saw the rat in the box, she made an odd sound, almost like a cat hissing.

“Well,” Horst said, closing the lid and looking up at me. “It’s a fancy rat. That’s a good thing.”

“Because you plan on taking it to a black-tie event later?”

“As much as I now kind of want to, no. ‘Fancy’ meaning the breed. And it’s good because you know where one gets fancy rats?”

Of course I didn’t know where one got fancy rats. I’d gotten more rat experience in the last five minutes than I’d had in my entire life.

Horst tapped one finger gently on the top of the box. “From a pet store,” he supplied. “And there’s only one pet store in Gallows Bay. Which means there’s a good chance we can find out who sent this rat while we see about returning it.”

“So...you really are about to turn into Sherlock Holmes.”

“That’s right. Ready for a little adventure?”

When it came to Horst, I was always ready for a little adventure. Even if, in this case, that meant hitting up a pet store to see if anyone there remembered who had purchased a fancy rat recently.

“You bet,” I said.

He beamed. “Perfect. I’ll drive. You hold the rat.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

The Gallows Bay pet store, a place called Meow Do You Do (yes, I was annoyed not to have thought of a name that good for my cat café), was located in a strip mall, between a pirate-themed gift shop and a jewelry store that, judging from the window display, exclusively sold the kind of jewelry ostentatious grandmothers like.

There weren't any customers in the pet store when we walked in, just a young woman with sandy blond hair hanging down on either side of a severe center part. She wore a maroon uniform polo with a nametag that read EMMA and three black and gold "Employee of the Month" pins lined up along the collar.

"Good afternoon," she said, her voice bright and syrupy. "Welcome to Meow Do You Do. How can I help you with your pet care needs today?"

Horst sauntered up to the counter, leaning one hip against it and fixing Emma with his patented crooked grin. "Hi. I'm the Pied Piper, of Pied Piper Lotions & Potions, and this is Glory O'Bryan, the genius behind the new Purrates Café. I'm sure you've heard of it. There are cats there."

Emma looked politely confused, and also like she was suddenly very worried that we were there to sell something to her and not the other way around. "Um...okay?"

"We were wondering if you happened to know this rat." He turned to me, waiting for me to lift the lid of the box so Emma could take a look inside.

She leaned forward to peer into the box, still uncertain about this encounter. "It's hard to say. Does that look like one of our rats? Yes. But it's a fairly typical-looking fancy rat. I couldn't say for sure that I know this particular rat."

Horst propped one elbow on the counter. From that position, his shoulder was lower than Emma's face, and he had to look up slightly at her. "But have you sold a rat that looked like this recently? Say, today?"

The young woman nibbled her bottom lip as she thought it over. "I think so, yes."

"Great. Do you remember what the person who bought the rat looked like?"

She appeared to put a great deal of energy into thinking, her lips moving a little as though she were talking herself through a memory. Finally, she relaxed again. "Yeah. He was very average."

"Average?" Horst said.

Emma nodded. "Very average."

"I don't suppose you could be more specific," Horst said.

"I guess his hair was, like, brown? And he was, you know, average height?" She looked genuinely troubled that she couldn't remember anything else. I had a feeling Emma hadn't earned Employee of the Month three times just doing the bare minimum in terms of job duties.

"Helpful," Horst muttered to me.

"Everything okay out here?" a female voice called from a doorway about twenty feet behind the register area. Glancing over, I saw a middle-aged woman, her dark hair pulled back into a sagging ponytail, her eyes kind but very tired.

Horst straightened up. "Good afternoon," he said, sauntering her way, his considerable charm on full display. "We were hoping you might be able to tell us

who purchased a rat from you recently.”

I couldn't see what he was doing with his face, but I could see the impact it was having on the woman.

She was practically melting, her eyelashes fluttering hard, the corners of her lips quirking up, a blush staining her cheeks.

“Why don't you come back to the office and we can look through the receipts from the past few days? ”

I stayed where I was by the register as the woman led Horst into the office. I had a feeling he would have better luck with her alone than he would with me hanging around. Besides, we had a second reason for hitting up the pet store.

Holding the box out toward Emma, I said, “I don't suppose I could return this rat to you, could I?”

She hesitated. “We're not supposed to, actually.

But...” She glanced over her shoulder toward the office, where Horst and the person I assumed to be the store manager were busy looking at a computer.

“I can make an exception, I guess, since I'm pretty sure that rat's only been out of the store for a couple hours. ”

“Great. Thank you so much.” I placed the box on the counter between us while she started tapping away at the cash register.

“Your snake didn't want to eat it or something?” Emma said.

“I’m sorry? Why would...Who would feed... What ?”

“It happens. A lot of snakes will eat live food, but some prefer frozen.” She shrugged.
“At least that’s what people say.”

I grabbed the box from the counter, squeezing it slightly in my hands as I processed what she’d just said. “But this is a pet rat. Surely you don’t sell pet rats to people to feed to snakes.”

“I mean, we don’t care what people do with them as long as they pay for them.”

I turned the box around and raised the lid. Inside, the little apricot and white rat shifted so it could meet my gaze with its tiny little eyes. I didn’t know a thing about rats or their body language, but I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this creature was frightened.

And for good reason. If I returned it to the store, if I left it there, it might be tossed into an aquarium with a snake to eat at its leisure.

I made the decision without thinking it over.

“I guess I’ll keep it, then,” I said, closing the lid of the box. “I don’t suppose you have rat cages and supplies and stuff.”

“We do, yeah.” Emma started to point toward an aisle at the far end of the store, but then she stopped. “So, you know rats are, like, social animals, right? They don’t like to live alone.”

There was nothing about that moment that felt significant. Nothing that said, “Pay attention. This is very important.” The world didn’t stop spinning under my feet while I lurched my way toward an epically bad decision.

And so all I said was, “Oh, they don’t?”

She nodded. “So if you want to keep it, I would suggest getting another rat. And if that’s the rat we sold earlier, we still have her sister available.”

“I’m sorry. I know nothing about rats and their needs, and I’m pretty sure I’m in over my head. I should probably just leave this rat here with you so you can sell her and her sister together. I’m sure some nice non-snake owner who’s looking for pet rats will come in soon.”

Or that’s what I should have said. But it’s not what came out of my mouth.

What I actually said was, “I guess I’d like to see her sister then.”

Worst. Decision. Ever.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

Horst was just finishing up in the office when Emma and I returned to the checkout area, each pushing a cart.

“No, no, don’t you worry about it, Kathleen May,” Horst called as he walked backward out of the office. “You’re an angel, and I appreciate your help. And remember to let me know what your mother thinks of that hand cream. You can tag me on social media—#IveGotThePipe.”

I managed not to roll my eyes, but, I mean, only just. You couldn’t accuse Horst of being shy about self-promotion. The man always had samples of his lotions and moisturizers secreted about his person somehow.

Actually, maybe I should be studying his business acumen. He seemed to be doing pretty well, even leaving his illicit activities aside.

Horst turned, his face less cheery than the tone of his voice, and offered me a tight smile that I assumed meant Kathleen hadn’t found what they were looking for. Then his gaze fell on the cart in front of me.

“What’s all this?” he asked.

Wordlessly, Emma left the cart she was pushing and walked around the checkout area to get behind the register. I began unloading the supplies she said were necessary onto the counter—a food bowl, a litter box, bedding, a water bottle, a hammock, food, toys, a wheel.

“Glory O’Bryan,” Horst said. “None of this looks like cat stuff.”

“It’s not.” Finishing with my first cart, I pushed it aside and turned to get the second one, which contained the cage.

And the actual rats.

Plural.

Which I was still trying to wrap my head around myself.

“I thought the plan was to return the rat,” Horst said.

“That was the plan,” I said. “But it turns out they also sell their rats to people who want to feed them to snakes.”

“And?”

I turned to Horst while Emma worked her way through scanning and bagging the smaller items.

“If we return her, she might be eaten by a snake,” I said.

Horst cocked his head to one side. “Which is pretty much the natural life cycle of the rat. They’re born, they scare a person or two, and then they get eaten.” He shot me his winningest smile, the one I was still sure he practiced in the mirror ten times every morning. “It’s what the rat expects.”

Here’s the thing about being an animal lover—it’s very difficult to explain how you feel about animals to someone who’s not an animal lover.

Maybe it was because I’d grown up in a town full of shifters, where the squirrel you saw running up a tree might turn out to be the guy who changed the oil in your car.

Or maybe it was because when I looked into that rat's eyes, I saw a small, vulnerable creature who needed my help.

Or maybe it was because when we got back to the rat area and saw the remaining female rat curled up all alone in a sad little heap, it reminded me of how I felt when I lost my own sister.

Look, I know I can't save every animal in the world. But if the opportunity presents itself to help another creature, I have to take it.

Oh—and there's my well-known history of bad decisions.

Honestly, going all-in on rat ownership probably wouldn't even make my personal top ten list. As bad decisions go, it had nothing on, say, my very brief goth phase in high school, during which time I secretly donated all my non-Hot Topic clothing to the local thrift store and my mother was so furious when she found out that she refused to buy me any new clothes for a year.

I moved around the cart to heft out the box that contained the ridiculously heavy cage, which Emma insisted was the one “all the rat people” purchased. “I just have to do this,” I told Horst as I struggled to wrangle the long, flat box from the cart.

He was next to me in a blink, taking the box from me and muscling it onto the sales counter with ease. “I get it.” He reached up and gently touched his shirt pocket, where, I knew, Oomy was curled up, safe and sound.

He knew how I felt because that was how he felt about his kobolds. I didn't need to explain it to him—he just understood.

I suddenly felt all warm and gooey inside, like the molten chocolate chips in one of my fresh-baked cookies. I really hoped I didn't look like I felt, because if I did, I

probably looked like an idiot.

And then Horst looked down. “Why are there two boxes with airholes?” he asked.

I had a feeling he was going to be slightly less understanding about my decision to quite literally double-down on the rat situation. But before I could even start to explain, Emma paused in the middle of scanning the box with the cage and looked up at us. “Oh, that’s right. He was wearing a cape.”

Horst whipped his head toward her. “Who was wearing a cape?”

“The guy that bought the rat.” Emma resumed scanning.

“You didn’t think to mention that before?” I asked. I mean...how was a cape average ?

She just shrugged. “I didn’t think about it until just now.

We get some weird people in here occasionally.

” A nearby display of mealworms made me wonder if Quill, the Unseelie queen who enjoyed adding freeze-dried worms to her food, was one of those people.

“Like, aside from the cape, he was a regular dude.”

Horst pressed his fingertips on the counter and leaned slightly forward. “What color was the cape? Periwinkle? Vermillion? Mustard yellow? The kind of fabric that’s purple in some lights and green in others?”

I started loading the bags of scanned items into the cart. “Are you just guessing colors or do you know a lot of people who wear capes?”

“I’ve worked with a lot of magicians,” he said. Then he added, in a barely audible mutter, “Among other things.”

Emma shook her head. “No, it was black. Or wait—more like gray. With a hood.”

“A gray cape,” Horst said, and he paled under his swarthy tan. “That’s just what we need.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

“Who do you know that wears a gray cape?” I asked as soon as we had the car loaded and Horst was backing out of the parking space in front of Meow Do You Do.

He had his arm behind my seat, half turned to look where he was going because his Honda Civic was old enough to not have a backup camera. “Hmmm?” he asked.

“It seemed like you had an idea of who might have sent you the rat,” I said. “Who is it?”

He turned back around and shifted into drive. “I mean, I may know a few people who were known to wear gray capes, but I certainly don’t know for sure who sent the rat.”

He was silent as he navigated through the parking lot and out to the road, and I had the uncomfortable feeling that he was lying to me. That’s just what we need , he’d said.

Because he knew who the man in the cape was. And he wasn’t happy about it.

“But—” I began.

“You never explained the second rat,” Horst said abruptly. “I understand not returning the first one. But why get another one?”

I looked down at the two boxes on my lap. “Emma said they’re social animals and need friends. And you should have seen the second one, all alone in her cage. She looked so depressed.”

“Do you think maybe she’s depressed because she’s a rat and she’d prefer to get life over with quickly?”

“No one wants to be killed by a snake,” I said with a shudder.

“Not a fan of snakes?”

“Is anyone?”

“The kind of people who buy live rats to feed to reptiles, I imagine.” He brushed his fingers against my knee. “But not these rats. Because of you.”

Not these rats . It wasn’t quite praise, but it did make me feel a teeny little glow.

Horst turned down Main Street, and I noticed a store called Yesterday’s Treasures. “Oh, can you stop here real quick?” I said, remembering my meeting with Julia. “I want to see if they have some cute china I could use for the birthday party while I’m thinking about it.”

He pulled into a parking spot along the curb and started to unbuckle his seatbelt.

“Wait—could you stay in the car with the rats?” I asked. “I don’t want to leave them in case it starts to get too hot.”

He looked from me to the two boxes I was holding out to him. “You know, when I brought you tacos to celebrate booking your first party, I imagined the day going very differently. It definitely did not end in rat-sitting.”

I leaned over and kissed his cheek. “You are nothing if not adaptable. Thanks!” I left him sitting in the car, a box with a rat in either hand.

A bell jingled pleasantly as I opened the door to Yesterday's Treasures.

Inside, the store was dim and cool, with a slight musty smell that spoke of neglect.

A big blond man stood behind the counter, focused on something I couldn't see.

As I got closer, I realized he was looking at a computer screen hidden by the counter.

And judging from the way he was moving the mouse, he was intent on a game of Solitaire.

"Oh, hi," he said when he finally looked up. "Sorry. I didn't hear you come in. Can I help you find something?"

"I'm looking for china saucers," I said.

"China, china..." he muttered, looking around at the contents of the shop.

I had the feeling the place had once been beautifully staged—there were some areas that looked as though someone with exquisite taste had set them up.

But most of the merchandise appeared to have been tossed wherever there was room.

"Wait. We had a really nice set come in the other day. At least, the woman who brought it in said it was really nice." He turned toward a glass case to his right, partially hidden from me by a stack of wooden crates, and tapped the top. "Yes. Here. Gorgeous set."

I moved around the crates to peer in at a full set of china in a heavy pattern of navy and forest green, edged in gold. It didn't exactly scream "princess party." And the price tag didn't exactly scream "good for a struggling business owner."

“This is very pretty,” I said. “Do you have anything else?” When I’d worked at the antiques shop back home, we’d often sold mismatched china settings at a steep discount, and I really hoped Yesterday’s Treasures had something similar. “I’m looking for something more...eclectic.”

And by “eclectic,” I meant cheap.

The blond man rubbed his thumb over his jaw. “You know, I think we have some boxes of odds and ends back there,” he said, gesturing to the back of the shop. “You’re welcome to have a look.”

“Great. Thank you.” I meandered toward the back, the merchandise becoming more and more chaotically arranged the farther back I went. I ran my finger over a dresser, impressed with the amount of dust that came off it.

But for someone with a limited budget, the store’s disarray was awfully promising. I was looking for bargains, not meticulously curated treasures.

I had to peer into several boxes before I found one that contained a jumble of china saucers.

I winced at how carelessly the delicate plates were stored, but aside from a few chips here and there, they were in remarkably good shape.

I began sifting through them, pulling out any that looked like they would go well with a princess theme.

I found several with delicate floral patterns, some with mint or peach accents, and one with a gorgeous pink and gold pattern.

There was no price written anywhere, but I hoped given that the box looked almost

abandoned, I might be able to negotiate a reasonable price.

As I made my final selections, I was distantly aware of the bell over the door jangling, followed by soft voices up front. I didn't think anything of it until I started carrying the saucers toward the counter and realized I recognized one of the voices. I stopped dead in my tracks.

It was Horst. And he sounded...well, not frantic, exactly, but urgent .

“Brooch . It's like a ladies' pin,” he said. “Black stone set in silver scrollwork. I'd take anything that looks close to that.”

“Definitely haven't seen anything like that. I do have a very nice ring I've been assured is genuine topaz, if that's something I can interest you in,” the blond man responded.

“No, I really need the brooch.” Silence followed, and I could practically sense Horst pacing back and forth in front of the counter. “Look, if you get a brooch that looks anything like what I'm describing, please call me.”

I emerged from the shadowy maze of antiques to see Horst handing the blond man his card.

He glanced my way, his eyes falling to the stack of plates in my arms. “There you are,” he said, leaning against the glass of the counter as though he hadn't just been begging the proprietor of Yesterday's Treasures to produce a very specific item.

“I thought you were staying in the car with the rats,” I said.

“I was, but then I thought you might need some help if you found something. And it looks like you did.” He sprang forward, scooping the top half of my stack into his

own arms. “You’re lucky I’m such a thoughtful guy.”

It was hard to pin down exactly what was off about him. On the surface, he looked like the same man who’d hopped through the window of my kitchen holding a bag of tacos. But underneath was a restlessness that disappeared if I tried to focus on it too hard.

Something was bothering him.

“Everything okay?” I asked him.

“Glory O’Bryan,” he chided gently. “I’m here with you buying vintage plates, and I have two rats and a rat cage waiting in my car. What could possibly not be okay?”

I had no idea. That was what worried me.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

“This is a bold choice,” Horst said as he fit the panels of the cage together.

I was supposed to be reading the directions to him, but once we got started, it all seemed pretty intuitive.

Besides, the way the sinews in his arms shifted as he got everything put together was more than a little distracting.

What was it about men doing handy things that made them so irresistible?

The only thing that would have made this moment better was if he had taken off his shirt, but apparently, he didn’t feel that was necessary.

Much to my disappointment.

“What’s a bold choice?” I asked, trying very hard to focus the conversation.

“Putting a cage with rats in it here.” He waved his free hand, gesturing at the room around us. “You know—in a cat café.”

“I didn’t really have much of a choice, did I?” I said, picking up the next panel and handing it to him. “It can’t go in the kitchen, or in the café area where people eat.”

I didn’t say it, but I also didn’t want the cage in my apartment, ostensibly because I didn’t want to annoy my cat Pancake with unexpected roommates.

The real reason was I didn’t want rats in my apartment.

“You don’t think this is going to make the cats insane? I mean, seeing the rats but not being able to get to them?”

“Emma seemed to think it would be fine,” I said, although frankly I had some reservations about this arrangement.

“Ah, yes. Emma. The rat expert.” Horst got the four sides of the cage together, and I handed him the top.

“She seemed to know a lot about rats,” I said.

“Sure, sure. Very knowledgeable.” He set the cage top in place with a metallic clunk-clunk. “Especially for someone who doesn’t own rats herself.”

Well, there was that. Also, as much as she insisted that plenty of people owned both rats and cats, there couldn’t be that many people who had their rat cage in a room with ten cats. And not the same ten cats all the time—I rotated cats in and out as they were adopted.

“Let’s hope for the best, shall we?” I opened the double doors and began strewing the bedding material around the cage.

“I always hope for the best.” Horst helped me add the various rat accoutrements—the litter box, a hammock, the food bowl, and the water bottle.

When the cage was ready, I carefully opened the two boxes, let the rats into their new home, and closed the doors behind them, making a mental note to pick up a lock that would work on the cage door.

Emma might have assured me that cats and rats could coexist peacefully, but they definitely wouldn’t if some overeager café patron opened the door and the rats

escaped.

“What are you going to name them?” Horst asked.

“Since this is a café, I thought they should have bakery-inspired names. So the first one is Cookie, and the new one is Cupcake.” As we watched, Cookie began exploring, climbing the first wall she came to, her little paws scrabbling up the wire bars of the cage.

It was a two-level cage, with a little ramp providing access to the second floor, though Cookie made it to the upper floor just by climbing the cage wall.

Cupcake, though, made it only as far as the litter box, where she immediately curled into a hunched-up ball and...sat there.

“Huh.” I peered closer at this newest addition. “Does she still seem sad to you?”

“I’m sure she’s just processing her change in circumstances.”

I twisted a strand of hair around one finger. “I wonder if I should—”

He stopped me by grabbing my shoulders and turning me to face him.

“You’re doing everything humanly possible to give those two rats a good life.

They’re probably the luckiest rats in Gallows Bay.

And while I totally support you in whatever you feel you need to do to help our new rodent friends, I don’t want you fretting over whether or not they fully appreciate what you’re doing for them. ”

Horst insisted he didn't have any magical abilities beyond his pipe-playing skills, but there was something about being this close to him that made little prickles of awareness dance over my skin.

Even if I wanted to focus on my new arrivals, I couldn't tear my eyes away from the warm honey of his eyes.

Reaching up, I linked my arms behind his neck.

"You can't stop me from fretting," I said.

His lips curved up in the barest hint of a smile. "I can distract you."

"I'd like to see you try," I said.

Because I would. I really, really would like to see that.

Turning his head, he pressed a ghost of a kiss against the inside of one wrist, my pulse quickening beneath his lips.

Then he ducked his head to capture my mouth with his own, and if Cookie hadn't started using her new wheel—which squeaked to high heaven—I would have forgotten about the rats entirely.

I would have forgotten about everything entirely.

Until, that is, I heard a door close and someone huffed out an exasperated sigh.

"Of all the things you mortals put your undiscerning mouths on, that has to be the most disgusting," a voice said.

A very unwelcome voice.

Horst raised his head languidly, though I could tell his whole body had gone on alert. Casually, as though nothing he did was intentional, he turned and put himself between me and Quill.

“To what do we owe the honor of this visit, your highness?” he asked.

She barked out a laugh, the weasel curled around her neck offering an echoing chortle. “So formal this evening, puppy. You must really be rattled.”

“I have no idea what you’re speaking of.”

When she smiled, the overhead lights made her sharp teeth gleam like poisoned pearls. “Oh? You have no recollection of the message you received earlier?”

Horst shoved his hands in his pockets. “I’m not worried about that.”

“No, of course not. Why would you be?” Quill said, tapping one pale index finger on her chin.

The cat section of my café was designed to be warm and cozy, full of natural light and cat trees and couches where you could sit with a cat on your lap, imagining how much better your life would be if you took your new best friend home with you.

But with Quill standing there, the temperature seemed to drop ten degrees.

Even the cats picked up on the change in atmosphere, skulking off to hide themselves away from her glittery eyes.

“What are you doing here, Quill?” I asked. “And how did you get in?”

That made her laugh. “Oh, these mortals. Always asking questions with obvious answers. I’m here because I heard exciting things were happening.” She looked around, her gaze falling on the rat cage against one wall. “And it looks like the rumors are true. Who are your little friends?”

She drifted closer to the cage, one hand coming up to brush against the knob that opened the cage door.

For a moment, I was afraid she might eat them or something—Quill always seemed vaguely threatening, although I’d never actually seen her do anything super evil or scary—but she merely leaned close to the cage and studied the rats.

When she was done, she straightened up with a cluck of her tongue.

“Oh, mortal. Always biting off more than you can chew.”

That felt a little insulting. Sure, I was new to rat ownership. But they were rats . I mean, people paid hundreds and even thousands of dollars to exterminators to kill unwanted rats in their homes. If it cost thousands of dollars to get rid of them, how hard could just keeping them alive be?

“You’ve made your point, Quill,” Horst said.

“Oh, but I haven’t.” She spun around to face us, the fabric of her voluminous ice-blue skirt brushing against the cage. Tilbippo, her weasel, made a sticky chuckling sound. “I also came to see if you needed any assistance, puppy. With, say, old friends?”

“I definitely don’t need your help.” Horst had managed to edge his way between me and Quill again, but I could still see the way her face broke into a delighted smile.

“Of course. You have everything under control. I’ll just leave you to enjoy your

new...rats.”

And with a regal nod, she swept out of the café. Horst took a deep breath, the tension leaking from his shoulders as he turned to face me.

“What did she mean? About old friends?” I asked, searching his face.

“She likes to throw stuff at the wall and see what sticks.” He stepped closer, reaching out and settling one hand on my hip. “Now, where were we?”

It turned out where we were was going upstairs to my apartment to finish what we’d started. Which was almost distracting enough to make me forget all about Quill’s weird visit.

Almost.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

I'm not saying Quill is bad luck, but she certainly had a knack for showing up just before disaster struck.

Which, as Horst explained to me, was why she came—she really, really loved chaos.

The last time she'd appeared on my doorstep was shortly before Horst tried to steal a locket, one of the few things I had left from my sister Destiny, a misunderstanding that wound up almost getting both of us killed.

So was I a little nervous about what her appearance at the café meant?

Sure.

Did I tell myself it was all in my head?

Of course.

Did I imagine all manner of terrible events going down in my café until I had to ground myself—repeatedly—using Roger's five senses method?

You bet.

But then...nothing happened. Everything was fine. I mean, sure, Cupcake still seemed sad and listless, and she had pretty much holed up in the litter box I'd supplied them, leaving it only to get food and water. But as Horst pointed out, she was a rat. Perhaps that was what some rats were like.

So, no, disaster didn't strike.

Immediately.

Nope. It took a few days.

The first sign that something had gone terribly, terribly wrong—or deliciously right, I suppose, if you looked at it from Quill's perspective—was the squeaking. I'd gotten used to the steady squeak-squeak-squeak of the wheel, and occasionally I'd hear Cookie squeak a bit here and there.

This was much different. This was a crescendo of squeaks. So much squeaking my first thought was that the cats had somehow managed to get the door of the cage open—despite the lock I'd found—and the rats were in mortal danger.

No.

It was worse.

Much, much worse.

Because when I hurried up to the cage, I found the doors closed tight. Cookie was Spiderman-ing her way across the underside of the top of the cage, hanging upside-down as she climbed from one side of the cage to the other. Cupcake was still in the litter box, along with the source of the squeaks.

Because the squeaks weren't coming from Cookie or Cupcake.

They were coming from the pile of wiggly pink jelly beans beside Cupcake.

It took an embarrassingly long time for my brain to fully comprehend what I was

seeing. Because... how ? How was this possible? How had Cupcake managed to produce a literal pile of what even I, with my very limited rat knowledge, understood were baby rats?

I mean, sure, I knew the basics—when a daddy rat and a mommy rat love each other very much and all that—but where had Cupcake met a daddy rat?

Was Cookie...But, no. One of the videos I saw of rat care advice had featured a male rat and his, um, appendages .

Which were large. And very, very obvious.

Cookie wasn't dragging her two best friends behind her.

Not that the how really mattered. At that moment, what really mattered was finding out what I needed to do about this situation.

A rapidly escalating situation. Because if I wasn't mistaken, Cupcake was still producing jelly beans right before my eyes like the worst kind of magic trick.

For the second time in less than a week, I headed for the pet store.

Luckily, Emma was once again behind the counter as I practically tumbled into the store in a bit of a panic.

“Good afternoon. Welcome to Meow Do You—”

“Do you remember that rat you sold me a few days ago?” I interrupted.

She gave me a once-over. “I think so?”

“You sold me a rat. And a cage. And a whole cartful of stuff?” It had been five days ago. How often could she possibly con someone into taking a pregnant rat off the store’s hands?

“Sure?” She didn’t look convinced that she’d ever seen me before, but I didn’t have time to jog her memory.

I had a rat making a bunch of other rats in my cat café.

“That rat had babies.”

I waited for her to spring into action. Surely this was a shocking piece of news. She’d probably want proof—I had taken photos before I left—and then she would...well, I wasn’t sure what the protocol was, but surely this young woman would know what to do.

But she didn’t look particularly interested. “Cool?”

Cool? That was it? “I didn’t want her to have babies.”

“Oh.” She shrugged. “Then...sorry?”

“How is this possible?”

“Oh. Yeah, they come to the store all mixed together and we separate them by sex. So it happens.”

It. Happens.

“You sell a lot of pregnant rats?”

She tossed her hair—this time in a long ponytail—over one shoulder and began playing with the end of it. “I mean...most of our rats are sold as feeders, so it’s not like it matters.”

Oh. Right. That was why I had them in the first place—so they didn’t end up fed to snakes.

“We can take the babies back if you don’t want them. Just bring them in when they’re about three weeks old.”

“What will you do with them?”

She looked at me like I was an idiot. “We’ll sell them?”

As pets. Or as feeders. Whatever someone wanted rats for.

Yeah. That was not happening.

It looked like Quill was right—I’d bitten off more than I could chew.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

I found Horst standing in front of the rat cage when I returned to the café.

“Glory O’Bryan,” he said, flashing me a “I can even make a woman forget she’s got a metric ton of baby rats squirming around” grin. “You seem to have more rats than I remember you having.”

“Apparently, Cupcake was pregnant.”

“Ah.” He propped one elbow on top of the cage and leaned his head against his fist. “What an interesting development.”

“That’s one word for it.” I joined him in front of the cage, looking in at the bundles of joy. “Go ahead and say it.”

“Say what?”

““I told you so.””

“First, I don’t remember warning you that you were acquiring a pregnant rat. And second, that hardly seems productive right now.”

I studied him out of the corner of my eye. He could be so flippant that I usually assumed he was teasing me. But at the moment, he seemed nothing but sincere.

“Hey,” he said softly, tugging on a lavender lock of hair. “It’s going to be okay. This isn’t the worst thing that could happen.”

“I have a birthday party in less than three weeks,” I said. “And now I’m going to have a cage full of rats. And I still need to find a Princess Palollipop, and I need to find myself a more professional apron than my bedazzled cat one, and I need to plan my baking, and...”

“Okay, first of all,” he said, “consider the rats a birthday party bonus. Are you charging for the extra furry creatures that will be on display during this party? No. So that’s a freebie. It’s like a hundred extra fuzzy things.”

“Value added,” I muttered, even though I was pretty sure no business blog I’d read would classify a passel of naked baby rats as added value in most ventures.

But a dimple flickered in Horst’s cheek. “Sure, sure. Value added. As for the rest of it...look, I’m going to admit that some of those words made no sense to me. You need a lollipop?”

“Princess Palollipop.” When he said nothing, I added, “She’s a cartoon princess. I promised I could get the real Princess Palollipop to come to the party.”

I waited for him to tell me that had been a terrible decision, that you should never promise a princess who didn’t, you know, actually exist. But instead he simply placed one hand under my chin and tipped it up gently so he could meet my gaze. “You know where we find princesses?”

I really, really hoped the answer wasn’t some sort of sleazy line designed to get me into bed.

Okay—it wouldn’t have been the worst thing if it was.

But it wasn’t. “The Enchanted Forest,” he said.

“I didn’t think they had princesses there.”

He waved one hand. “Not usually, but they do throw parties, and sometimes their guests request princesses, and you know what that means? They know all the best local princesses.”

Well, that made sense. “I guess I could call Cass...”

Horst shook his head. “We’ll just head over there and pay her a visit. She’d love for you to see the place. You know...officially.”

I supposed that sneaking into the park after hours, “borrowing” the park’s giant goose vehicle, and seeing an enchanting light show courtesy of Horst, his kobolds, and some bioluminescent algae wasn’t quite the same as visiting the park legally.

“Sounds good. I’ll grab my purse.”

“Maybe we can see if they want to adopt a couple rats. Or maybe a dozen.”

Somehow I doubted they would.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

Horst bypassed the main parking lot for the Enchanted Forest, the one outside the gorgeous white castle, and instead turned into the driveway of a rambling house.

At the end of the driveway, near a very familiar large shed, was Cass, the park's current proprietor and no stranger to magic herself.

She had Mother Goose, the park's main mode of transportation, pulled out of the shed and was busy washing mud off the giant bird's wheels.

Another woman, this one with strawberry-blond hair and a vintage-looking white dress, stood nearby.

"Cass Lindstrom," Horst said as he climbed out of his car. "Have you created a new age-defying moisturizer? You look younger every time I see you."

"Pretty sure that's just the peace that comes from not being married to the wrong man," she said. "Who would have thought divorce could be the most important part of a skincare regimen?"

"A terrifying advertising slogan if I ever heard one," Horst said. Then he gestured at me. "You remember Glory O'Bryan."

"Of course. Glad to see you again." Cass gave me a friendly wave, then indicated the other woman. "This is my sister, Toni."

"Stepsister," the other woman corrected. "We don't actually share DNA, which is why I'm so much better looking."

Cass sprayed her with the hose.

“Hey!” Toni exclaimed. “This is my favorite dress.”

“And I told you to wear something more practical to wash Mother Goose. But nope. You knew better.”

Toni brushed wet hair back from her face. “There’s no point in owning cool clothes if I never wear them,” she grumbled.

“‘Cool’ is subjective,” Cass said.

They were so clearly sisters, so obviously used to teasing each other like this, that a spasm of grief seized me.

That was the thing about grief—you can be totally fine for hours, days, months, and then you see something that reminds you of the person you lost and you’re falling back into that sea of pain and loss like it just happened yesterday.

But I was getting better at letting the grief wash over me without drowning in it, and when Cass twisted the head of the hose to cut off the water, dropped it onto the gravel beside the goose, and asked, “How’s your café doing, Glory?” I was able to answer.

“Great,” I said. Then I thought of what the business blogs would want me to say. “Mostly great,” I amended.

Cass pushed her chestnut hair back behind one ear. “Anything I can help with?”

There was something so open and genuine about her, like she was truly interested in helping, despite the fact that we were competitors when it came to birthday parties.

Then again, considering how packed the parking lot we'd passed had been, it didn't seem like I was much of a threat to the park.

"I'm getting into birthday parties," I began.

"Oh, they can be a lot of fun," she said. Then she seemed to think about it a little more. "Usually," she added.

"I have a party booked, and the birthday girl wants Princess Palollipop to make an appearance. I've called everybody I can find online, but I can't find anyone who can do it. Horst thought you might know of someone."

Cass tilted her head, the sun picking out sparks of auburn in her hair.

"We mostly get requests for classic fairy tale princesses—Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty—so I've never had to hire anyone to do Palollipop.

But I do know a performer who doesn't advertise because she doesn't need to.

She's the absolute best kids' party entertainer I know of.

If she doesn't have Palollipop in her repertoire, she'll know someone who does. "

"That would be amazing. Thank you."

"No problem. Happy to help." She shaded her eyes from the sun with one hand and looked past me to where Horst lingered by the car. "Quill tells me you had an unexpected surprise at the café. A rat."

If anything, his grin widened, but tension still radiated off him. "You know how it is. You live your life as the Pied Piper, you have to expect a few pranksters."

Cass made a humming sound in her throat, then glanced from me to Horst. “Let me run in and get that phone number for you. Horst, can you give me a hand?”

A hand with...getting a phone number? I was about to follow them into the house when Cass turned.

“Toni, why don’t you show Glory your garden?” she said. To me, she added, “Toni specializes in carnivorous plants. She’s amazing—her plants have won a ton of awards.”

Horst flashed me an apologetic look. “I’ll be right back. And you really should check out that garden. How often do you get to see award-winning Venus flytraps?”

I watched as the two of them disappeared through the front door of the house.

“Well,” Toni said, kicking at a tuft of grass. “That was subtle.”

“I’m sure they’re just...” I trailed off. I was no longer sure of anything.

“Come on. I’ll show you my garden.” She led me down a path that ran past the house. “They’re not sleeping together, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

It actually wasn’t. I mean, I supposed there could be something going on between them—Horst seemed to blow in and out of my life with the wind, and I had no idea what he did with his time when he wasn’t with me.

But I didn’t get that vibe from them. Besides, if Horst was sleeping with Cass, he could have just left me at the café rather than bring me along.

So I wasn’t worried about that.

It was the easy understanding between them.

Something was going on with Horst, something he wasn't telling me about.

Cass had seen that instantly. I couldn't be sure exactly what they were talking about inside the house, but I was fairly certain Horst had come here not just to get a princess's phone number, but to loop Cass in on whatever he had going on.

The path to the backyard was cool and shady thanks to a series of trees planted along the house, though I still had to swipe sweat off my forehead as we emerged to find a series of old tires, each with a jumble of plants growing within them.

I was no expert on carnivorous plants, but I think I would have been able to figure out that these were no ordinary plants.

There was something just a bit off about them, their green a little too bright, the bits of red here and there a whisper of a warning.

Horst and Cass are friends , I told myself. Of course he would confide in her.

Still, my hand drifted up to my throat, where the necklace I wasn't wearing felt heavy in its absence.

I thought we were friends, too.

Wasn't that the bare minimum of what I hoped to mean to him? If we weren't even friends, then what was I doing?

Drawing closer to one of the tires, I saw a fat, heavy fly land on the bright red mouth of a Venus fly trap. The fly turned slightly to the right, then to the left.

And then the mouth closed around it, the fly disappearing behind the plant's sawtoothed grin.

Poor thing never saw it coming.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

“I can understand why you’d feel left out.” Roger steepled his hands and leaned back in his chair on the small screen of my phone.

“I’m not sure I can,” I said, brushing my hair out of my face and trying not to see the extra pastel streaks I’d added while attempting to add some pizzazz to my cupcakes after Horst dropped me off at the café the night before.

I guess I needed his fairy dust to make my magic work, after all.

“I know he’s been friends with Cass for longer than he’s been friends with me. That’s not the problem.”

“But...?”

“It’s just...” I turned to look out of the window of my apartment. From there, I could see the harbor, the water sparkling with the early rays of the sun as it lapped against the harbor wall. The faint cries of seagulls drifted in.

“You’re afraid she also got a BFF necklace from him?”

I laughed. “No, nothing like that.” Although I didn’t know that for certain, did I?

Horst could be out there doling out little half-heart necklaces like there was no tomorrow for all I knew.

He certainly wasn’t wearing his half of the necklace he’d given me.

“I just wish he would tell me what’s going on. ”

“Have you tried using your big-girl words and asking him?”

“Yes.” I swallowed. “Sort of.”

“Ooh. I do like a good ‘sort of’ answer.”

“I mean, I did ask him if everything was okay.” I watched a small sailboat set off from the harbor, the people onboard just little colorful dots from my vantage point.

“I didn’t say, ‘Hey, I know you’re super worried about some dastardly average-height, average-hair color dude in a cape, so why don’t you tell me what’s going on. ’”

“Hmmm.” On the screen, Roger pursed his lips, deep in thought. “Why do you think you’re letting him get away with not telling you more?”

I turned away from the window and made my way over to the couch. “I guess I wanted him to want to tell me about it, you know? Because that would mean he felt like he could confide in me.”

And that was the problem. He knew something was going on. I knew something was going on. But if he wasn’t ready to share his burdens with me, were we even really friends? Or was whatever was between us just about sex?

“I want to go back to your feelings about seeing Cass with her sister,” Roger said. “Because I think that’s important.”

Pancake waited for me to get settled on the couch, then leapt up, impressively nimble considering his bulk. He climbed right onto my lap, putting one foot directly onto my

stomach. I grimaced.

Maybe everyone was right. Maybe he could stand to lose a few pounds.

“Why would that be important?” I asked Roger, forcing myself to focus on what he had said.

“Because I think your relationship with Destiny is at the root of most of your current issues, and seeing a healthy pair of sisters probably dredged up a lot of feelings.”

“I fail to see how my relationship with Destiny is impacting how I feel about whatever is going on with Horst.”

“No?” He tapped his fingertips together.

“You spent a lifetime feeling like she meant more to you than you did to her. And then, once you lost her, you discovered that she had somehow acquired a dangerous magical object she had no business having in her possession and that she told you nothing about. Do you really not see the parallels between that relationship and the one you’re currently fretting over? ”

Okay, when he put it that way...

“But Destiny was my sister. Horst is my...whatever. They’re two very different relationships.”

“Of course they are. But your feelings and experiences with Destiny have given you a need for extra reassurance. To feel wanted and included. That’s going to bleed over into any other relationship you have for the rest of your life.”

I sighed. Destiny was gone. It had broken my heart when she died, but I’d assumed

I'd put our complicated relationship behind me. I didn't want to carry the weight of that for the rest of my life.

"So what should I do to fix that?"

"Great question. What should you do to fix that?" Roger asked, leaning forward and fixing me with kind eyes.

"I pay you so you can tell me how to fix my head."

"No, you pay me to point out what's really going on in that head. You've got to figure out the solutions."

I blew out a breath. "Fine. But I'm paying you less for this session since I'm having to do half the work on my own."

He chuckled.

Like I was joking.

(I was joking. But I was tempted.)

"Glory, I can't give you an easy fix for decades of feeling unworthy and unlovable. But I can tell you that it's okay to have needs in a relationship. And in a healthy relationship, it's okay to ask for what you need."

"We're not in a rel—"

But he held up one hand to stop me. "The nature of your relationship with this Pied Piper character doesn't matter.

Because whether you're in a committed romantic relationship or just a good friendship, the mechanics are the same.

Romantic partners do things for each other.

Friends do things for each other. They'll fill your cup up, not drain it.

And if you're spending time with someone who only drains your cup, you know you need to end it. ”

I sighed. “I hate it when you use therapy-speak.”

“And yet, you keep paying me.”

“Because you won't let me quit therapy,” I said.

“Because you're not ready to quit therapy.” He wriggled his nose. “When you're ready, I'll be the first one to tell you.”

For as much crap as I gave him about stringing this along, I really did believe him.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

What I learned about rats from the situation I was in was that I would never want to have a rat infestation in my home.

Because here's the thing—these guys are champion reproducers.

Cupcake gave birth to thirteen baby rats, and they grew at an astonishing rate.

One day they were wriggly pink blobs, and a few days later they were growing peach fuzz, and in the blink of an eye they were the size of full-grown mice, covered in fur with their little eyes open.

And it turned out that a rat pregnancy only lasts about four weeks, and the babies can get pregnant when they're five or six weeks old. The math on rat reproduction was staggering.

So many rats in such a short period of time.

So. Many. Rats.

That said, the babies proved to be a pretty decent draw for the café.

I figured since I was already in the business of adopting out cats, it wouldn't be hard for me to find homes for the rats.

I drew up my own application and, in a stroke of brilliance, made it a policy that adopters had to take a minimum of two rats.

That meant I only needed to find six adopters, provided one person opted to take three.

Unfortunately, I hadn't gotten a single application. Plenty of people wanted to see them at the café, but not one person, upon seeing the chaotic mass of rats in the cage, said to themselves, "Wow. I want this in my own house."

One Friday, a little over a week before Andi's party, I had a group from a local elementary school come through.

The kids were enthralled with both the cats and the rats, and one particularly bright kid immediately set about trying to figure out what the babies' father looked like based on the colors and patterns of the babies.

Meanwhile, the rest of the kids offered their input on potential baby names on the clipboard I'd set out to collect ideas.

After they left, I scanned the list.

"Ratty McRatface," I read aloud. "Turdbucket. Oh—here's a possibility if we ever decide to change your name, Jojo: Fart."

Jojo plunked his butt down beside my feet and looked up at me, clearly unimpressed.

I bent down to rub him behind the ears. "I guess this is why no one lets kids name things."

The sound of the café's phone ringing made me straighten up. I hurried through the doors to the café area and grabbed for the phone by the register. "Hello?"

There was a long, breathy silence, and for a moment I thought I was the recipient of

an old-fashioned obscene phone call. Then a distorted voice asked, “Did the Pied Piper like his gift?”

“Who is this?” I asked.

A click was the only response as whoever it was on the other end hung up.

I stared at the receiver, then set it back down.

I shivered, that creepy voice looping over and over in my head.

It shouldn’t have unsettled me quite so much.

I mean, the person sending Horst a message had obviously been to the café when he dropped off the rat.

A phone call wasn’t nearly as threatening.

But there was something so awful about that deep, slow voice, something that made my stomach twist.

The scrape of a shoe coming from my kitchen made me jump.

I whirled around, wondering how effective it would be to pelt an intruder with baked goods, but it was only Horst who stepped out from the kitchen.

His warm amber gaze took in what I imagined was my very pale face, one hand clutched to my chest and the other hand launching my first cupcake bomb.

He dodged the frosted missile easily, following its trajectory with his eyes until it landed with a yellow and white splat on the floor by the door.

Then he looked back at me. “That one didn’t live up to your expectations?”

“Sorry. I thought you were someone else,” I said.

“Someone you greet with hurled cupcakes?”

“No. The person who just called. They asked if you liked their gift.”

His jaw tightened as he glanced toward the door of the café. Then he slid closer and captured my cupcake-throwing hand, rubbing his thumb over my palm. “Well, of course I liked it. Who doesn’t like a present?”

“Do you know who it was that called?”

He slipped his arms around my waist. “I told you I don’t know who sent the rat.” He pressed a kiss to my temple. “Now, why don’t I clean up that mess while you tell me about your day.” Releasing me, he busied himself finding a roll of paper towels and some multipurpose cleaner.

“But—”

“Any good name ideas for the babies today?” he asked, crouching down to get to work on the floor.

I sighed. He wasn’t going to tell me even if he knew something.

“Not really, no.” Since it was nearly closing time, I grabbed a cookie from the display case and nibbled at the edge of it. Might as well eat it since it didn’t look like I was going to sell it today. “I can’t believe there are thirteen of them.”

Horst bunched up an overly enthusiastic wad of paper towels. “If you think about it,

you really got an incredible deal on that rat. You paid ten bucks for her, and then you got thirteen extra for free. You're a hell of a shopper, Glory O'Bryan."

"Let's hope I don't find any more bargains like this one."

"Thirteen. That's a baker's dozen, isn't it? Seems like fate to me." He finished cleaning up the cupcake, dumping the used paper towels into the trash. Then he disappeared into the kitchen. I could hear the water running as he washed his hands.

"Yeah, well, fate's a bitch," I called.

He returned, his head tipped at the precise angle you see male models do in cologne ads. "Or maybe fate knew those little babies would be safe with you." His eyes softened. "Maybe fate knew you're the kind of person vulnerable creatures can be safe with."

I took another bite of my cookie, wondering if he meant more by that than just that I was a sucker for baby rodents. But it was Horst, and I didn't always understand what he was trying to tell me.

Then he sauntered closer, a predatory aura around him. "I had a thought."

"Was it about baby rats or sex?"

"Glory O'Bryan! Your mind is stuck in the gutter—and, yes, I'm feeling smug that gutter works for both rats and sex. Actually, I was thinking about neither of those things."

"Oh?"

"I was thinking you need to unwind a little."

“I don’t really have time to unwind. I’m still getting everything situated for the party and—”

He pressed a finger to my lips. “That’s exactly what I was thinking. So why not kill two birds with one stone?” His honey gold eyes glimmered. “Up for an adventure?”

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

I thought perhaps we would sneak into the Enchanted Forest again, or walk along the harbor, or...well, I didn't know. But keep in mind the last time he took me out for a romantic evening, there were dancing kobolds and luminous algae involved.

This time, he took me to a strip mall.

And not a cute strip mall, either. Not one of those strip malls with pretty signs and flowers growing in well-maintained planters and little boutiques open late.

"Oh," I said, as we pulled into the nearly empty parking lot. "This is..."

"Prepare yourself for a night of enchantment," he said, driving around behind the blocky warehouse building and parking in a pool of shadows untouched by the sparse streetlights.

"I mean, it sure looks enchanting."

He slanted me an amused grin. "Looks can be deceiving, Glory O'Bryan."

"I sure hope so," I muttered. I started to open my car door, but Horst set one hand on my arm, his other moving to his shirt pocket.

"Wait. Not yet," he said. Then he pulled out his pipes and brought them to his lips, coaxing a strange, enticing melody from the instrument. For a moment, I thought this was, like last time, a romantic gesture, a swirl of sound meant to take my breath away and distract me from all my worries.

But this wasn't the same tune he'd played before on the beach at the Enchanted Forest, guiding his kobold friends to dance over the water. The song he played now was more discordant, a jangle of notes nowhere near as gorgeous as what he'd played previously.

Distract me ...

Acting on a hunch, I looked over his shoulder through the car's back window. From that angle, I could just make out a back door into the warehouse, illuminated by a weak overhead security light. And around the edges of that door were shapes.

Dark, moving shapes.

Kobolds.

I looked back at Horst, who was still playing away. "Are you breaking into that building?"

His eyes danced, and he pulled the pipes away from his mouth for a moment. "Little bit, yeah." Then he returned to playing the song that, as I understood it, walked the kobolds through what to do.

"Horst! If we get arrested—"

He grinned at me as movement by the building caught my eye again. A dark strip appeared as the door opened a few inches. "Believe me, Glory O'Bryan. This is worth getting arrested for."

"Nothing is worth getting arrested for—again, I might add."

But despite the fact that I'd already seen Horst arrested—technically twice, although

since the second time was after he'd escaped from the back of a cop car during his first arrest, I'm not quite sure that counted—and certainly didn't want this night to end with another awkward encounter with the police, there wasn't much heat in my voice.

What can I say? It was nice to have someone to make bad decisions with.

Just before we walked into the building, Horst paused outside the door to play a brief little tune on his pipes, far louder than the one he played before. The pipes were practically screaming. When I winced, he gave me a quick wink.

“Sorry. Sometimes volume matters.” Then he played another short burst of melody, this one softer, before taking my hand and leading me inside the building.

I wasn't really expecting anything per se—with Horst, I never knew what to expect—but I certainly wasn't expecting it to actually be a warehouse, complete with shelving and boxes and grim industrial lighting that made the whole place look bleak and sad.

I mean, I knew Horst was capable of turning even the most mundane moment into an adventure, but not even he could transform—

A whooshing sound stopped me in my tracks. “Somebody's here,” I whispered, squeezing Horst's hand.

But he merely chuckled. “Don't worry. It's nobody human.

” His golden eyes darkened for a moment, and I realized he was talking about his kobolds, who he desperately wanted to transform back into humans.

But then the old sparkle was back, and he led me through the shelves to a large open

area.

Aside from the puddles of color at regular interval on the concrete floor, this space looked as bare and cold as the warehouse area.

But then I realized one of those pools of color was...growing. It rose up from the ground, a muddle of gray and red and black and brown filling out until I realized it was some kind of immense inflatable, a bounce house shaped like a shark looming over a pirate ship.

“What...?”

Horst pinched the bridge of his nose. “Guys, we talked about this,” he muttered, pulling out his pipes once again and playing what sounded to me like an annoyed little tune.

Immediately, the whooshing stopped and the shark inflatable began to deflate with a drawn-out hiss.

Then, farther down, more whooshing started up again and a different inflatable began to puff up as it inflated.

This one was a princess castle. A giant princess castle with turrets and crenellation and a slide that brought you down to a drawbridge.

“Oh,” I whispered.

Horst watched me for a moment, his face unreadable. Then he squeezed my hand. “Come on. Let’s check it out.”

We walked over slowly, letting the castle fully inflate before we reached it.

Then we stopped to pull off our shoes—I was amused to see that Horst wore a pair of socks printed all over with images of gummy bear candies—and Horst helped me through the opening to the bouncy portion of the inflatable.

Around me the walls of the castle rose up, printed with climbing roses in so many shades of pink.

The surface under me undulated as Horst climbed in behind me, his eyes fixed on my face.

“It’s something, isn’t it?”

“It’s gorgeous.” I had to keep shifting my weight around to remain steady as I turned in a slow circle, imagining what it would be like to see all this as a child.

If it was this magical for me...

“What is this place?” I asked.

“Bounce Bounce Bounce,” Horst said. “They sell smaller inflatables—that’s what was on the shelves in the back—and they rent out these big ones.

” He bounced a few times, making the bottom of the castle ripple under my feet.

Then he tipped his head toward the back.

“Want to take a look at the view from up top?”

The back of the castle was whatever the bouncy house version of climbing wall was, with generous hand- and footholds to get us to the turret on top. That was where the slide was, but it also offered a view of the place.

Not that it was much of a view. Despite his charm and fairy dust, not even Horst could change our surroundings, which remained a bland gray box broken up only by the deflated bounce houses around us.

“It’s beautiful up here,” Horst said. I thought at first he was making a joke, but then I turned and realized he was watching me intently. Carefully, he reached out one hand and wrapped a finger with one of the pastel locks of my hair. “You fit right in here. You look like a unicorn princess.”

I blushed. “I’m still not always in control of my magic.”

He tugged gently on the strand of hair, then let it fall to my shoulder. Moving closer, he tipped my head up with two fingers beneath my chin. “You don’t have to believe in yourself all the time. Even I don’t always have faith in my magic.”

“You? Mr. Pied Piper himself? He of the big pipe and all the other sexy hashtags?”

He lowered his gaze so his eyes were hidden from me, but not before I saw the flash of something that looked suspiciously like doubt or even fear in those honeyed depths.

Then he swallowed, and when he looked back at me again, he was as poised and collected as ever.

“Don’t mistake stupidity for confidence. ”

“Whatever it is, it’s working for you.”

He raised his other hand, framing my face with his palms, and leaned closer. “If I have confidence in anyone, it’s you. You may not always believe in yourself, but I believe in you enough for both of us, Glory O’Bryan.”

And with that he kissed me, my heart fluttering in my chest as I lost myself in the moment—the whoosh of the fan keeping the princess castle inflated, the warmth of Horst’s fingers on my jawline, the familiar scent of sandalwood almost completely overwhelming the strange plasticky smell of the inflatable, the taste of Horst’s lips on mine, the fireworks bursting behind my closed eyelids.

This was exactly the kind of adventure I wanted. Breaking into warehouses after hours so I could make out in a princess bouncy castle with a man who made me believe fairy dust is real and that I was stronger than I thought.

I mean, I supposed it would have been better without the breaking and entering part, but sometimes you have to take a few risks to find magic.

Horst’s hands slid down my back and tightened on my hips. “Want to test out the slide?”

He managed to make it sound much dirtier than sliding down a bouncy castle slide should sound. “By ‘test out the slide,’ what exactly do you mean?”

His fingers slipped under the hem of my shirt. “You know what a slide is,” he said, trailing kisses from the spot under my ear down my throat.

“I know, but you seem awfully excited for a guy who’s about to zip down a pretty short slide.”

“Hmmm. Good point. It does seem a little boring, doesn’t it?” He drew back, his face scrunching up as he made a point of looking like he was deep in thought. “Hey, you know what might make it more interesting? If we weren’t wearing clothes.”

“We’re not having sex in a bouncy castle,” I said.

His eyes widened in faux shock. “Glory O’Bryan! You and that dirty mind of yours. Who said anything about sex?”

“Your hands are certainly doing a lot of talking at the moment.”

“Really?” He leaned back in to nibble my ear. “Do you find them persuasive?”

“Sir, this is a kids’ princess castle.”

“Didn’t sound like a no to me.” He started to sweep his hands upward, taking the fabric of my shirt with them.

“I’m not sure I meant it to.”

Not that it was a yes, either, mind you. No matter how magical that night seemed, I wasn’t about to actually have sex in a bounce house that got rented out for kids’ parties.

But I could still lose myself in the moment when Horst kissed me again, his hands still slowly working my shirt up my body, the sound of the fan keeping the castle inflated rising sharply, almost like...

Sirens.

Police sirens.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

Horst's head snapped up, and he held very still for a moment, holding his breath as though that might help him hear better. Then, as the sound became undeniable, he swore under his breath.

"The police are here," I said.

"Yeah." Horst pulled his hands away from me and grabbed his pipes, blowing a quick tune before shoving them back into his pocket. "I think the slide might be the fastest way out, don't you?" And with that he swept me against his side and leapt onto the slide like something out of an action movie.

It was pretty hot, actually. It might have been hotter had we been, I don't know, swinging on vines across an alligator-filled moat or something and not bouncing our way down an inflatable castle slide painted to look like a pastel rainbow, but whatever.

We reached the drawbridge at the bottom, the impact of hitting what seemed to be an extra springy part of the castle bouncing me onto Horst's chest. I gazed down at him, at his beautiful face that seemed almost to be carved from living wood, his heavily lashed honey-mead eyes that always seemed to hold both a secret and a promise, and his incredibly kissable lips.

For a moment, I forgot that we were, you know, running from the law, and it seemed like Horst did, too.

And then Oomy appeared out of nowhere, making frantic kobold squeaks, and the whooshing stopped suddenly as unseen kobolds apparently unplugged the inflatable,

which began rapidly sinking around us.

Horst grinned as though this was all part of a regular day for him—and for all I knew, it could be—and rolled to his feet, helping me up.

We stopped to shove our feet into our shoes, and then we darted for the back door, which seemed like a mistake to me.

Wouldn't the cops be waiting out there for us?

They hadn't come through the front door yet, the one closest to the inflatables, so they had to be out back.

But there was no one there when we emerged from the warehouse. Horst hustled me to the car, breathing a sigh of relief as we closed the doors behind us. "That was a close one," he said, leaning back against his seat. Then he straightened up. "Oops. Spoke a little too soon."

Turning, I saw the flash of a police light at the far end of the strip mall.

That was when it hit me. The cops weren't there for Bounce Bounce Bounce. They were there for a different business. The one at the other end of the block.

The pawn shop with the deer targets in the window.

Headlights briefly blinded me as the cop car drove along the back side of the strip mall, obviously checking everything out.

Horst's hands slipped to the hem of my shirt again. "I'm going to need you to take this off."

“What? Why?”

“I’m just very interested to see what bra you have on today. Your black one? Maybe something in red? Or even...leopard print?”

“The cops are going to be here any minute. Shouldn’t we get out of here?”

“Too late now. If they see us driving off, they’ll be all over us.” He leaned over the center console, setting his lips to the base of my throat and scraping his teeth over the sensitive skin there. “It’s called an alibi. Just go with it.”

Maybe Horst kissing my neck just plain made me stupid, or maybe the whole night had eroded my good sense, or maybe I really did just make the worst decisions, but I allowed Horst to strip my shirt off and toss it into the back seat.

Then he shoved his hands through my hair, tousling it thoroughly as he crushed his lips against mine.

And if I thought jumping onto the slide of a princess castle like some kind of Indiana Jones was hot, this was about one hundred times hotter.

I knew the cops were seconds away from the car, and I still almost begged Horst to take me right there in the front seat of his Civic, a handful of fast food wrappers brushing my ankles as I shifted my feet on the floor.

I had come so close to forgetting that we were making out only as an alibi that I was genuinely startled when someone rapped on Horst’s window and a flashlight lit up the car from outside.

I let out a little half scream that earned a nod of approval when Horst drew back.

“Nice touch,” he whispered before he turned to roll down his window.

With a handcrank. Because that’s how old his car was.

“Why, Officer Melody Simpson! What are you doing here on this lovely evening?”

I winced. Of all the cops to find us out here...

Officer Simpson lowered the flashlight so it was no longer in my eyes, and I could see a mixture of resignation and confusion warring on her face. “A better question, Mr. Pfeiffer, would be what are you doing here?”

Horst looked toward the dashboard, rubbing the back of his neck as though he were embarrassed to have to admit exactly what we were doing. “As to that, officer, we were...uh...” In the cool light from the flashlight, I could see he was even blushing. “Well, we just needed a little time alone.”

“I see.” It was obvious that she did. Because, you know, the light, while no longer in my eyes, was still on me.

Me and my rose gold bra with the little rhinestones along the straps just glittering away in the police officer’s flashlight.

“This is kind of déjà vu for me. The last time I saw the two of you, you were making out while Ms. O’Bryan was shirtless. ”

Horst half turned in his seat, stretching one arm out and resting his wrist on the steering wheel in a pose so casual I almost believed we hadn’t just emerged from an illicit encounter in a bouncy house rental warehouse.

“I hate to disagree with an esteemed officer of the law, but that just isn’t true,” he

said, his tone light.

The beam of the flashlight wavered ever so slightly. “No?”

“That was the last time you arrested me. But the last time you saw me was after I had bailed out, and Glory definitely had a shirt on by then. Remember? You told me to stay out of trouble?”

She nodded slowly. “I do remember that, yes. And it looks like you didn’t listen.”

Horst jerked back as though she’d slapped him.

“I think that’s going a little far. Maybe we didn’t have the best judgment this evening, but”—he turned to look at me, a dazzling smile on his lips even though the policewoman couldn’t see it—“just look at this woman. She makes it hard to make good decisions. But I certainly wouldn’t call what we were just doing ‘getting into trouble.’”

“Mmhmm.” Officer Simpson didn’t sound convinced. “There was a break in just down the way there. Clyde’s Pawn Shop.”

Horst looked back at the policewoman, shaking his head. “Crime’s getting worse every day. I’ll tell you what, officer, I sure am grateful to have people like you looking out for all the law-abiding citizens of Gallows Bay.”

Officer Simpson shifted the flashlight from one hand to the other. “As much as I appreciate that, it certainly seems like a big coincidence, doesn’t it? You being here while a break-in was going on?”

“Not such a coincidence,” Horst said with a shrug. “We were looking for a dark, isolated place where we could spend a few minutes, um, talking. I would imagine that

burglars look for the same kind of places, right? Just for less fun purposes.”

Officer Simpson practically snorted. For a moment, her gaze went to the base of my throat, and I realized Horst had left a hickey there with all that teeth scraping.

Sexiest. Alibi. Ever.

“You didn’t happen to see anything odd, did you?” she asked.

“We weren’t exactly paying attention to anything outside the car,” Horst said.

“I’m sorry. Had I known a crime was going on and we had the chance to provide information on the miscreants involved.

..” He trailed off, then reached over and laid his hand on my knee.

“No, actually, sorry. I probably still wouldn’t have been able to tear my eyes away from Glory here. ”

Officer Simpson studied us both for a moment, then shook her head. “Against my own better judgment, I’m going to let you two go. But maybe try to find more socially—and legally—acceptable places to, as you put it, ‘talk.’ Okay?”

“We definitely will. Thank you, officer.” Horst reached down to roll up the window, then stopped. “And if I do happen to think of anything I might have seen, I’ll give you a call.”

“Thank you.” She walked toward her car but turned to watch us as Horst rolled the window up and started the car.

“Excellent work, Glory O’Bryan,” he said as he buckled up, backed out of the

parking space, and drove slowly past the cop car toward the front of the strip mall.

I'd buckled up, too—no sense courting a seatbelt ticket from Officer Simpson—and I struggled to pull my shirt over my head with my seatbelt on. I was relieved that we'd managed to escape another encounter with the cops with no arrests, but something was bothering me.

“Why did you bring me here?” I asked, managing to tug my shirt on under the shoulder portion of my seatbelt.

“I thought it might be helpful. You're throwing a princess party, right? Maybe you could rent a princess castle inflatable.”

“But I don't have a parking lot big enough for an inflatable that size.”

“Ah. Well, maybe something smaller.” He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he drove us back toward my apartment. “It was just a thought.”

It was possible that Horst really hadn't considered the size of the inflatables versus my parking lot. But that brief tune he'd played before we entered the building made me certain he had an ulterior motive for taking me there.

Because the music had been really loud.

Loud enough to be heard down by the pawn shop.

For kobolds to hear down by the pawn shop.

“Did you break into that pawn shop tonight?” I asked.

He slanted me a surprised look. “I was with you the whole time.” He lowered his

voice to “sexy growl” territory. “You know what we were busy doing.”

“I...” An image of exactly what we’d been doing rose up in my mind and I had to take a couple deep breaths to clear my head. “You know what I mean.”

“This is how little you trust me, huh? I break into your café...” He glanced over. “How many times was it?”

“At least twice.”

“See? Just two times, and the next thing I know, you’re accusing me of being a one-man crime wave.”

“I notice you’re not denying it.”

There was tension in his arms, which practically vibrated as he held the steering wheel.

Finally, he relaxed. “Fine. It’s possible some of my kobolds may have attempted to gain entry to the pawn shop.

I told you—I’m always looking for magical objects, and sometimes that means tip-toeing across the line of what’s generally considered legal. ”

So the whole evening was planned not around the princess castle, but around the pawn shop. “Why bring me along at all, then?”

We stopped at a red light, and he turned his head to look at me, his smile almost sad. “Didn’t you have a good time?”

“I did, but—”

“Then maybe just accept the night for what it was. We both enjoyed ourselves. No one has to get bailed out of jail. A successful night all around.”

The light turned green, and he turned his attention back to the road. “I know something’s going on with you,” I finally said. “I wish you would tell me what.”

He was quiet for a long, long time. Then, finally, he said, “I don’t know why you think that. But if there was something I wasn’t telling you, it would be for a good reason.”

When we got back to the café, Horst said he was too tired to come in, which certainly could have been true. But it also could have been an excuse.

After I let myself into my apartment, I slumped down on the couch, stroking Pancake slowly as I thought about how cagey Horst had gotten at the end of the night. Then I thought about what Roger had said the other day.

Friends do things for each other.

I wanted to be able to help Horst, if only he would let me. But he wouldn’t even tell me what was going on.

I froze, my hand on Pancake’s back mid-stroke.

I didn’t know exactly why Horst was looking for something, but I knew what he was looking for.

And what’s more, I had an idea of where I might be able to find it.

It was late, but witchy antique shops keep very late hours. Pulling out my phone, I scrolled through my contacts until I found what I was looking for. My old boss

answered on the third ring. “Bixley’s Antiques, Collectibles, and Oddities,” an ancient voice said.

“Bathsheba, it’s Glory O’Bryan.”

There was a pause, and then she croaked, “Well, young lady, it’s been a very long time since I’ve heard from you. I’m assuming you’re not just calling to find out if my gout went away.”

“Yes, I—”

“It did not, by the way. In case you were wondering.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I paused in case she had any more updates she wanted to share. When she stayed silent, I said, “I’m looking for something, and I was hoping you could help me...”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

Cass showed up at the café a couple days later, a big cardboard box in her arms.

“Hey,” she sang as she walked in and set the box down on one of the wrought-iron tables. “I come bearing gifts.”

“Ooh, I love gifts,” I said, walking around the counter to check out what she’d brought.

“Horst mentioned something about a bedazzled apron?” She shot me a questioning glance before continuing. “Anyway, my daughter Margot is getting into catering, so she has a bunch of nice aprons. I grabbed one for you to borrow.”

“That’s so sweet of you. Thank you.” I had completely forgotten about picking up a more professional apron, so it was a relief to know I could check that off my list.

“And we had some crystal vases that I thought you might be able to use, plus some fancy forks with fairies on the ends that seemed perfect for a princess party.”

She held out one of the forks for me. It felt like real silver, with a cherubic fairy face forming the blunt end. “These are amazing,” I said.

Cass leaned back over the box, digging around. “There are few other things in here. Some tablecloths that you might be able to use, that sort of thing.” She straightened up, gesturing at the box like she was Vanna White and I had just asked to buy the letter “E.”

“Cass, this is incredible. Thank you for thinking of me.” I put the fork back into the

box with the rest of the stuff. “Let me get you a coffee. On the house. And anything you’d like to eat.”

“I’m not sure if you’re just being polite, but I don’t care. I will absolutely take you up on that. Can I get a cappuccino and...” She walked over to the glass display case and studied the contents. “And one of those Almond Joy cupcakes.”

“Absolutely.”

While I made her cappuccino, she meandered over to the window, where a fluffy orange tabby named Cheddar Murphy was perched, nose pressed to the glass.

“This guy’s adorable,” Cass said.

“I imagine he’ll get snapped up soon. The really pretty ones seem to move through here quickly.” I thought of Jojo, who was cursed with being unremarkable looks-wise but definitely remarkable gas-wise. He was going to be with me for awhile.

I was still thinking about how I might make cats like Jojo more attractive to adopters when there was a loud crashing sound. “What the—” Cass said, turning to face the window that looked out onto the parking lot.

Or rather, what had been a window. Now it was a hole surrounded by a few remaining bits of glass, the rest of the glass scattered across the floor under the windowsill.

“Are you okay?” I asked, hurrying over to make sure she hadn’t been hit by any bits of flying glass.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” She shook her feet, dislodging a couple pieces of stray glass from her shoes, but she didn’t seem to be hurt at all. Moving closer, she bent down and

scooped up a rock. “Looks like this is what did it.”

It wasn't just a rock. Wrapped around it was a piece of paper, tied with a bit of twine. Wordlessly, Cass handed the whole thing to me, then watched as I undid the string and pulled the paper off the rock.

“It's blank,” I said, turning it over and then back again as I scanned it for any hint as to why someone would throw a rock through my café window.

“Blank?” she asked. “Can I see it?”

I passed her the sheet of paper. She did the same thing I had, flipping it over to check the back before shaking her head. “I don't get it,” she said.

“Me neither.”

“Cass Lindstrom! You're here!”

We both looked up to see Horst emerging from the kitchen, his face alight. But that light dimmed considerably when he saw the shattered window.

“What happened?” he asked, vaulting neatly over the display case in a move I was sure I'd still be thinking about when I was an elderly woman.

“Glory,” Cass said, jogging me out of a brief fantasy in which Horst vaulted over every piece of furniture in my apartment. “Show him.”

Oh. Right. The paper. I offered it to him, even though I didn't know what he was supposed to get out of it.

Unlike Cass and me, Horst didn't bother flipping the paper over. He held it up, his

eyes darting back and forth as though he were reading something written there. Then he crumpled the paper into a ball with one hand. “Well,” he said. “I suppose we should get this cleaned up.”

“What did it say?” I asked.

“It said—” He caught himself. “You saw it. There was nothing there.”

There had definitely been something there, something Cass and I couldn’t see but that Horst could. Some sort of fae magic, I imagined.

And he still wouldn’t tell me what was going on.

“You know what,” he began, one hand lightly patting the pocket of his shirt. “Maybe you should go visit your hometown for a week or so. Take a trip. Get away from all this humidity for a bit.”

I palmed the rock that had broken my window. It was roughly the size of my fist, and it occurred to me how lucky I’d been that neither Cass nor I was standing in its path when it came through the window. “I have a business to run. And a party to throw. I can’t leave town right now.”

“I can handle things for you while you’re gone,” he said. “I’m a pretty decent baker, believe it or not. Tell her, Cass.”

“He actually is,” Cass agreed.

“And I can take care of the cats. And the”—he winced—“rats. Only...the cats don’t use the litter box every day, do they? I really don’t do litter boxes.”

He was teasing me, but I wasn’t in the mood to be teased. Someone had just thrown a

rock into my place of business, and Horst knew who it was and why.

And he wouldn't tell me.

"What's going on, Horst?" I asked him, my voice deliberately soft and controlled.

"Why would you think something's going on?" he asked. Then he started moving toward the kitchen. "Do you keep your broom and dustpan back here?"

"I'm not an idiot," I snapped. "You know why this happened."

He froze halfway to the kitchen. When he turned around, his mask was so firmly in place that I could barely see the real him in there. "I don't think you're an idiot. But I do wish you would leave town for a little while."

"You could come stay at the Enchanted Forest," Cass offered.

"Thanks, Cass, but I'm not leaving unless I know why. Horst, are you going to tell me?"

A muscle in one of his cheeks twitched as he met my gaze. "There are things you are better off not knowing," he said finally.

"Then I'm staying." I crossed my arms over my chest and lifted my chin. If he couldn't trust me enough to tell me why he was worried, why should I trust him enough to listen to him?

Horst's shoulders sagged. "Fine. I'll get someone to fix your window tomorrow," he said.

"That would be helpful. Thank you."

With a nod, he turned and went to get the broom.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

Roger called me the morning of the party.

I had spent the night before baking my little heart out, and even though my baking had been supplemented with a few sparks of magic here and there, I'd managed to get through the three-tier princess cake and several dozen decorated cookies with no new streaks of color in my hair, which I was counting as a massive success.

"Morning, Glory," Roger said. "Get it? Morning Glory?" He chuckled at his own joke.

"I see you're feeling feisty this morning," I said.

"I'm more concerned with how you're feeling."

"I feel fine." Pancake stepped on one foot, and when I looked down, I realized I was wearing a sensible shoe with plenty of traction for the kitchen on one foot.

On the other was a purple cow slipper.

So maybe not fine after all.

I sighed. "What if this goes badly?" I asked. "What if some disaster happens and I get a bunch of one-star reviews and I have to close the café and I end up having to come home, broke and alone?"

And there it was. I might not know exactly where I stood with Horst, but we certainly weren't in a "sorry you lost your café and apartment, why don't you just move in

with me in the apartment/house I've never even invited you to" place.

And we obviously weren't in a "if you have to move back to West Virginia, I'll just go with you" place either.

He couldn't even share whatever was on his mind recently—we weren't exactly ready to share a closet.

I wasn't sure whether I wanted a future with Horst or not. That was the thing. I only knew I wanted a chance to find out what I wanted, and what he wanted, and I knew the only way I was going to get that chance was if I was in Gallows Bay.

"Glory," Roger said gently. "It sounds like you're spiraling."

"I just—"

"Okay, I need you to take a deep breath." He leaned forward and put his hands on his knees while I followed his instructions. "Is everything ready for the party? Decorations bought and put up? Baked goods frosted? Princess booked?"

"Yes. But—"

"Glory, you did that. You handled all of those little details. And today, if you have a hiccup or two, you'll handle those as well."

"Well..." He did have a point.

"I want you to try something new," he said. "I want you, before the party, to find a mirror and tell yourself it's all going to be okay. I want you to say, 'Glory, you've got this. You're ready. You're capable. You can handle what life throws at you.' Because you really can."

I took another deep breath, feeling the building anxiety starting to ease a bit. Roger was right. I'd moved to Gallows Bay and opened the town's first cat café. Next to that, one birthday party was, well, a piece of cake.

From a three-tiered princess cake.

Roger nodded as though he could read my thoughts. "Remember what I said. Mirror. Pep talk. Okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Roger."

"You're going to have a great day. After all, it's a kid's birthday party. What could possibly go wrong?"

Here's a very helpful piece of advice: If your therapist ever says "What could possibly go wrong?" like that, fire him. Fire him immediately.

And then send him a glitter bomb.

The biggest glitter bomb you can afford.

At first there were no indications that a disaster was looming over me.

I spent a few minutes in my bathroom, talking myself up in the mirror.

Then I slipped the apron Cass had brought me over my head and tied it in a bow behind my back.

It was really pretty, with mint and gold stripes, the heart-shaped top portion edged in

black lace and the bottom hem just barely hitting my thighs.

Kind of short for an apron, honestly, and fancier than I would have gone with myself, but obviously Cass's daughter knew a few things I didn't about professional catering attire.

Then I went downstairs to do one final check of the café.

Everything looked perfect. I'd kept decorations to a minimum in the cat area since even I can admit that cats are assholes bent on the destruction of all things beautiful and pink, but the café area was draped in streamers and paper flowers.

Each table was held a crystal vase that contained six pale pink roses, some cheerful daisies, and bunches of fragrant greenery.

I placed the cake and cookies on the front counter, my lovely vintage saucers and the fairy forks stacked beside the cake.

Even better, my mail carrier had slipped a slim package through my mail slot.

Opening it, I discovered Bathsheba had come through.

I held the brooch in my hands, wondering why it was Horst wanted something like this so badly he was breaking into pawn shops looking for one, then slipped it into the pocket of my pants.

Everything was working out perfectly.

Even the arrival of Quill didn't raise any alarms for me. She swept in, her neck mercifully bare, which meant she'd left her weasel at home.

“We’re closed for an event today,” I told her.

“And hello to you, too, mortal.” She stood in the center of the café area, hands on her hips, and looked around. “I had a feeling this was the place to be today.”

I returned my attention to the cookies I was arranging on a platter. “Unless you’re a six-year-old, it probably isn’t.”

But I heard the sound of a chair being pulled out, and when I looked over my shoulder, I saw that she was seated, her elbows propped on the table, fingers interlaced, watching me as though I were the season finale of *Bridgerton*. “Quill, I really need for you to go,” I said.

She didn’t move. “Don’t you worry, mortal. I won’t cause any trouble.”

Well, that wasn’t as reassuring as I would have liked, but I had a list of things to do and “remove bad-willed fairy from café” wasn’t on there.

I would just have to deal with her later.

With a stern warning not to touch anything, I hurried back to the kitchen to get a large glass beverage dispenser, which I’d filled with pink lemonade.

I also cut some strawberries to look like flowers, then added some mixed berries to the fruit platter and placed it close enough to the cookies that the kids—and most importantly, Julia—would see it.

Five stars: Who doesn’t love fresh fruit at a birthday party? I mean, the kids may not have actually eaten it, but at least it was offered.

By the time I had the food and lemonade all set up, it was just about time for Princess

Palollipop to arrive. And sure enough, I heard a car door slam in the parking lot.

Did it worry me that Quill leaned forward in her seat, her frosty eyes glittering and her mouth slowly curving into what might have been the biggest smile I'd ever seen on her?

A little. But the sound of someone puking their guts out on the sidewalk outside the café worried me more.

I hurried to the door, pushing it open to find a woman bent at the waist, spewing...

Well, look, she was vomiting. I'm not going to describe it. You get the idea.

"Are you okay?" I asked, crouching down a little near the woman, my hands hovering around her as though I might be able to do something helpful with them.

She shook her head weakly, gave a little cough, and croaked, "I'm so sorry about your sidewalk."

I did my best not to look at exactly what she was apologizing for. "Don't worry about that. Can I get you some water?"

The woman straightened up, turning her face toward me. "I don't think I can handle even water right now."

My stomach quivered with nausea, and it had nothing to do with what was all over a portion of my sidewalk. While the woman's face was pale with a decidedly green cast, there were two perfect pink circles of cream blush on her cheeks.

Just like Princess Palollipop.

Because this was Princess Palollipop.

Or rather, it was Stephanie, the woman I'd hired to play Princess Palollipop for the party.

I opened my mouth to say something comforting or offer something her stomach could handle, but nothing came out.

What could go wrong?

Roger's words came back to me, and I realized I desperately needed a mirror and a much better pep talk.

"Obviously, I can't work today," Stephanie said, wiping the back of one hand over her mouth. "I'm really sorry. I'll give you your deposit back, of course. And if you want, I can leave my Palollipop costume with you. No charge. I can come back and pick it up when I'm back on my feet."

For a moment, it felt like a good solution. And then I remembered the birthday girl asking me if I would get the real Princess Palollipop and not just put on a dress myself. She'd already met me. She knew I wasn't Palollipop.

"I don't have anyone who can wear it," I began.

But then movement in the café drew my eye. Looking up, I saw Quill standing on the other side of the door, taking in the diseased princess and the second coming of her breakfast with sheer delight in her eyes.

"You know what?" I said to Stephanie. "Yes. I will take the costume. And I hope you feel better soon."

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

“Problems, mortal?” Quill asked as I lugged the Palollipop dress through the door.

The thing felt like it was a hundred pounds of tulle and ribbon and silk roses, and I was relieved when I got inside and could lay it over one of the café chairs.

Quill watched, practically hopping from foot to foot with glee.

“Nothing you can’t help with,” I said.

That stopped the hopping. She narrowed her eyes at me, looking for all the world like a cat who’d thought it was getting a treat and suddenly realized a trip to the vet was on the horizon. “What do you imagine I can help you with?” she asked stiffly.

“I was thinking you could play Princess Palollipop at the party today,” I said.

She threw her head back and laughed, revealing the very pale skin of her throat, and she kept right on laughing until she realized I wasn’t laughing with her.

“Mortal?” she said. “Surely you jest.”

“Believe me, I really wish this were a joke.” Bracing myself, I lifted the dress again and held it up. It actually looked like it would fit her pretty well, so at least I had that going for me.

Quill took a giant step back, coming up hard against one of the café chairs. “There is no way I’m going to wear that and pretend to be a being called Princess Palollipop.”

I took a deep breath and thought about what Roger had said to me. Not the flippant remark about what could go wrong, but the thing about handling hiccups. I'd gotten this far in planning this party. There was no way I was going to let one princess with a stomach bug ruin it.

And if that meant I had to beg, then so be it.

"Please, Quill?" I said. "Please, please, please, will you play a princess at the party? I would do it, but the birthday girl knows who I am already. Look—I've got the dress. I've got the wig and the tiara. And I can help do your makeup."

Despite being pinned by the chair behind her, Quill attempted another step backward. "I will not wear any of that."

Tears pricked at my eyes as I imagined all the hard work I'd put in washed down the drain. My shoulders slumped, the dress sagging to the floor. "I'm desperate, Quill. I know it's a huge favor, but please. I'll do anything."

The look of horror that had been plastered all over Quill's face ever since I suggested she play Palollipop turned to interest and she shuffled an inch or two away from the chair. "Really? You're saying I would be doing you a favor?"

That seemed to be working, so I leaned into it. "Yes. Absolutely. I'd really owe you one."

Her gaze turned calculating. "And I would be royalty, obviously. A princess."

"It's like the role was made for you," I said.

She considered this for a moment, then smiled. "Very well, mortal. I will do you this very big favor, and you will, as you said, owe me one."

I didn't quite like the way she was once again dancing with glee, but I didn't have time to think too much about that. "Come on. You can get ready in my apartment."

Did I have misgivings about passing a mercurial Unseelie queen off as an upbeat cartoon princess?

Of course I did.

But was I also secretly kind of impressed with myself for handling what was one very big hiccup?

I sure was.

I was also pretty impressed with my quick-thinking regarding the sidewalk disaster I had going on in front of the café.

I didn't have a hose, but the Enchanted Forest did.

I called Cass and explained the situation.

She said she was in the middle of something but that she was more than happy to send over her daughter with the hose.

Hiccup number two: solved.

(It was a real shame that customers don't really appreciate a clean, puke-free sidewalk. I mean, if I wasn't able to clean it, that would be something they might put in a review. But I suppose "Five stars: No puke on sidewalk" might be kind of off-putting as a review.)

Once I had that taken care of, I helped Quill—or rather, tried to help her.

Mostly I offered suggestions while trying to stay out of bite range.

(She was surprisingly fast, honestly.) She kept shooting me poisonous looks, but she ended up taking my suggestions on her makeup, and she only ate the tip off one of my lipsticks.

I decided to call that a win.

I left her in my apartment to wait for her entrance cue and hurried downstairs, hoping I'd have just enough time to spray down my sidewalk before Julia arrived.

Happily, Cass's daughter hadn't just brought the hose over—she'd hooked it up to my outside spigot and washed the sidewalk clean while I was upstairs.

When I got outside, she was already recoiling the hose.

“Thank you so much,” I said. “I can't tell you how much I appreciate that.”

“No problem,” she said, focusing on unkinking part of the hose so she could continue wrapping it around her arm.

I was surprised by how much she looked like her mother, although she had a certain laidback vibe that was all her own.

Then she looked up at me, and her face went from amused to confused to concerned. “Where did you get that?” she asked, gesturing at me with the loop of hose in her hand.

I looked down. “Oh, the apron? Your mom let me borrow it. I hope that's okay.” A horrible thought struck me. “You don't have any catering gigs today, do you?” Maybe she needed it herself.

“No. It’s just...” She pressed her lips together, her cheeks growing pink as she became suddenly very interested in the hose. “That’s not one of my catering aprons. It’s, um...It’s part of a French maid costume I have. For, uh, time I spend with my wife.”

French maid costume.

Time with her wife.

Not a catering apron.

I looked down at what I was wearing, the heart-shaped upper part and all that lace suddenly making a lot more sense.

I was wearing the apron from a slutty maid costume.

To a kids’ birthday party.

Okay. Well, bedazzled cat apron it was, then. At least I’d found out before anyone showed up so I could change.

I was reaching behind me to untie the apron when a car turned into the parking lot, Julia behind the wheel. She caught sight of me and gave me a quick wave before pulling into one of the closest spots.

Margot shot me an apologetic look before slinking off to throw the hose in the back of her car. “Good luck,” she called as she climbed into her car, leaving me behind to greet the birthday girl and her mom wearing a sex apron.

Not that it was obvious it was a sex apron, I reassured myself. I certainly hadn’t realized that when I put it on. It just looked like a super fancy apron. No one would

know if I just played it cool.

As Julia opened the car door for her daughter, I tried to picture myself looking into a mirror.

Be cool. It's just an apron, Glory. There's nothing sexy about it.

Everything was going to fine.

And then Julia turned to walk into the building, and she seemed to get her first good look at me. Her eyes widened, her eyebrows shooting up as she stared at me, and I had a very good feeling that she was familiar with a certain sexy French maid costume.

It was a kids' birthday party. What could go wrong?

Thanks, Roger.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

Julia might have known that I was wearing a naughty maid's apron, but there was no way she could say anything about it without revealing she knew exactly what it was.

For a moment, we both stood there frozen, both knowing what was going on but neither able to admit it. It was Andi who broke the silence.

"I like your apron, Miss Glory."

"Thank you," I said in a strained voice. "Happy birthday! Why don't you come in and let me know what you think of your cake."

Luckily, Andi was thrilled with her cake, and with the decorations, and with the pink lemonade, which she promptly had two cups of. And once her friends started to show up, she was thrilled with them, and with the gorgeously wrapped presents they brought with them.

The plan was to start the party in the cat area and do cake toward the end.

Once everyone had arrived, I ushered the kids through the doors that led into the cat area.

I'd expected a lot of squealing and excitement, and there was some, but mostly the kids were relatively calm and very gentle with the cats.

So far, so good. Aside from the side-eye Julia kept giving my apron.

Twenty minutes into the party—on the dot—Quill threw open the door to the

stairwell up to my apartment and strode into the room, her small nose in the air. “Greetings, my royal subjects,” she said.

“Princess Palollipop!” several girls cried.

Julia caught my eye over Andi’s head and gave me a quick nod, like maybe she hadn’t quite forgotten about the whole sex- apron thing but I was winning her over by producing a decent Palollipop.

“Welcome, Princess Palollipop,” I said, walking over to Quill. “We’re so glad you could join us for Andi’s birthday party.”

The girls clustered around Quill, who flicked the long blond braid of her wig over her shoulder. “You,” she said, zeroing in on one little girl who was busy swiping her finger noisily under her nose. “The drippy one. Please keep your distance. If you leak on me, I shall have you executed.”

The girls giggled, while I leaned closer. “You can’t threaten to execute anyone,” I whispered. “That’s not really on-brand for Palollipop.”

“What? No executions?” Quill stared at the kids collected around her. “What is even the point of being a princess, then?”

I gritted my teeth behind a big smile for the kids. “You promised,” I hissed.

“I don’t recalling saying, ‘I promise to be a simpering idiot to fool the naivest of your kind,’” she said.

“Just try, okay? Smile or something.” I watched her lips spread wide in what I assumed was supposed to be a smile but looked more like an expression you would see on the clown from It. “Okay. Not that like.”

Her face relaxed into her usual haughty expression. “I am here to entertain you, children. Feel free to ask me about my life in my amazing castle.”

“What’s your favorite food?”

The answer, as anyone who’d spent any time Googling Princess Palollipop knew, was cotton candy-flavored lollipops. But of course Quill had neither done any research nor cared to get the answer right. “Insect larva,” she announced.

Luckily, the kids took it as a joke, bursting into the kind of laughter only kids are capable of.

“Do you know how to make balloon animals?” one little girl asked.

“I do, but only from the bladder of a hippopotamus.” Quill peered coolly down at the child. “Do you happen to have a hippopotamus bladder on you, by chance?”

More giggles. Boy, Quill was really killing it with the kids.

As long as she didn’t, you know, start actually killing , we’d be okay.

“Do you have servants?” Andi asked.

Quill looked directly at me. “Oh, yes,” she said. “Very many.”

There was no reason for a chill to run down my spine.

But it did.

Princess Palollipop was a hit, and by the time she said her goodbyes and escaped back to my apartment, we were halfway through the party and everyone seemed to be having a good time.

It looked like Quill wasn't the only one killing it. Roger was right. I could overcome hiccups. I had this in the bag.

And then I walked into the first cat room, the one closest to the café area. The one with the rat cage in it.

I froze, my mind desperately trying to process what I was seeing.

Because one of the doors of the rat cage was standing wide open. And, if I wasn't mistaken, the cage was empty. No rats at all. Which meant I had fifteen rats loose.

In a cat café.

During a little girl's princess birthday party.

There really wasn't a glitter bomb big enough to tell Roger how I felt about him at that moment.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

I checked the cage before I let myself panic. Surely, there were some rats still in there, right? Not all of them would have escaped, would they?

But as I scoured the cage for any sign of furry faces or naked tails, the reality of what I was dealing with set in.

Fifteen rats. Ten cats. And eight little girls.

All in a handful of rambling rooms with dozens of rodent-sized hiding places.

This birthday party was about to turn into a Wild Discovery-style bloodbath.

I whirled around, scanning the area behind me for any rats. Or cats for that matter. If I could just keep the cats distracted, maybe I could...

What? What was my amazing plan for overcoming this hiccup going to be? Because I didn't have anything up my sleeve.

Zero stars. Had to get therapy for my daughter and all her friends after they watched the cats tear apart a bunch of baby rats just before cake was served.

As if on cue, Jojo slunk into the room, ears pricked forward, back straight. He didn't look like he had spotted anything yet, but he certainly looked like he knew there was something to be spotted.

And that was when it hit me—treats. If there was one thing all ten of the cats loved, it was lickable treats, which they only ever got on very special occasions.

And, apparently, when I desperately needed them preoccupied.

I ran to the storage closet and flung it open, half hoping to see a bunch of rats huddled safely inside.

No such luck. But I did find several packages of treats.

Grabbing them, I sprinted into the room where the girls were squished together on the couches, petting some cats under Julia's watchful eye.

"Hey, everyone. Would you like to see how much the cats love these treats?" I said, waving the packages around. "They go crazy for them!"

I started passing out entire packages of treats, then showed the girls how to open the little tubes and slowly squeeze out the contents while the cats licked the ends.

Talk about a hit—the cats loved it, the kids loved it, and even Julia seemed pleased with how much cat interaction the kids were getting.

One of the girls finished a tube—far too quickly for what I needed—and reached for a second tube. "Oh, Sarah, not too many," Julia said. "I'm sure the cats' tummies don't need too much of that."

The cats' tummies definitely did not, but this wasn't the time to worry about that. "Oh, it's fine," I said breezily. "You go right ahead. It wouldn't be a party without unlimited treats."

Unlimited treats? I shot a baleful look at Jojo, who had abandoned his potential prey the moment he heard the crinkle of the packages. He had a big enough problem with gas as it was. What would unlimited treats do to his digestive system?

Probably the same thing fifteen rats would do to it, I told myself.

Fair enough.

I counted the cats, relieved that all ten were clustered around the kids, then waved one hand in the general direction of the café area and said, “I’ll be right back. I’m just going to check on...”

Julia wasn’t paying super close attention to me, so I let my voice trail off as I hustled back to the first room and began a frantic search for the missing rats.

Dropping to the floor to look under the coffee table, tossing cushions off the couch, moving every piece of furniture away from the walls.

Nothing.

Nothing, nothing, nothing.

I didn’t know a magic spell for finding lost rats. I did know one for finding lost keys, which I tried, but the only thing that happened is that I slightly singed a couch cushion and I turned a lock of my hair a smoky pink color.

I was running out of time. While I’d told the kids they could give the cats as many treats as they wanted, there was a limit to how many tubes were in those packages.

Meanwhile, the most productive thing I could think of to do was stand in the middle of the room, pressing my hands against my temples like I was Winnie the Pooh trying to squeeze a good idea out of my head.

“Glory O’Bryan, what’s wrong?”

I turned around to see Horst standing just inside the doorway leading to the café, casually posed like the hero on the front of a romance novel—arms crossed over a dark green T-shirt that did ridiculous things to his tawny skin and golden eyes, one knee bent, one foot slightly in front of the other, head thrown back as he took in the ransacked room.

And it all hit me at once—all the little “hiccups” that had added up to this looming disaster.

The words tumbled out. “My princess puked on my sidewalk and it turns out I’m wearing a sex apron and all the rats got out and any minute now the cats are going to find them and eat them in front of a bunch of little girls who love animals.”

His arms dropped to his sides, and he cocked his head. “A sex apron?” he said. “Aren’t all aprons sex aprons?”

Of all the things I’d expected him to say in response to me pouring out my plight... “What?”

He rubbed one hand over the back of his neck. “I just mean that all aprons are”—he looked around as if to ensure we were alone—“crotchless. You know?”

“Crotchless?” I felt like I’d been struck dumb. Literally just struck dumb.

“Yeah.” He stepped closer, lowering his voice. “I’m just saying that it’s an apron, and it doesn’t cover...” He trailed off, clearing his throat. “But I can see from the look on your face that I’m focused on the wrong part of what you just said.”

“You definitely are.”

“What part would you like me to focus on instead?”

“How about the part where I have fifteen rats running loose in a cat café full of kids?”

“Right. Got it.” He clapped his hands together softly. “How can I help?”

“Unless you have some magical way of corralling rats...” I caught a glimpse of the pipes in his shirt pocket and blinked. “Horst. You’re the Pied Piper.”

He shot me a cocky grin. “That’s what it says on my business cards.”

I bounced on the balls of my feet, barely able to contain the relief that rushed through me. “You can play your pipes and get all the rats to go back in their cage.”

He took a step back. “What? No, I don’t work with rats. That was an ancestor of mine. And look at the trouble it got us into.” With that Oomy popped her lizardy head out of his shirt pocket and gave a huge kobold sigh of agreement.

“But you could do it, right?”

The mask fell away, revealing a far more serious Horst than I’d ever seen before. “I have no idea. I’ve only ever played for the kobolds. Rats...I don’t even know where I would start. A different key. Different melody. It’s not something I can just do on the fly.”

I stepped forward and took his hands in mine. “Please, I’m desperate. You would be doing me a huge favor.”

His eyes lit up, and he tipped his head forward. “A favor, huh?”

What was it with fairies and that word? I had to remember how persuasive it was.

“Yes. And maybe you don’t know how to do it yet, but I’m sure you can figure it out.

I believe in you.” I squeezed his fingers. “Fairy dust, remember?”

“Well.” Horst rocked back on his heels as he considered. He glanced around at the wreck of a room behind me and sighed. “Okay. I’ll see what I can do. But I might not be able to figure it out. At least,” he added, “not before the cats realize there are rats on the loose.”

I released his hands and stepped back, suppressing the images that flooded my brain every time I thought of the cats and the rats in the same room. “Thank you.”

Horst pulled out his pipes, Oomy climbing up to settle in the space where his neck and shoulder met. He stared down at the instrument and blew out a long breath before raising it to his lips.

While he fiddled around with a few notes, I headed back to the room where the kids were still eagerly offering the cats treats.

I couldn’t imagine the rats were hiding back here, but if they were and Horst managed to lure them out, I wanted to be able to do something before the cats noticed what was going on.

What that something was, I didn’t know, but I had to be there to try.

And a few moments later, as the first strains of a melody reached us, I was very glad I was. Because as the notes floated into the room, the girls—all eight of them—froze, their heads swiveling toward the front room, their eyes glazed over.

Oh.

Nope, nope, nope.

I scurried back to the front room, waving my hands. “Not that one! Not that one!” I hissed at Horst, who stopped playing immediately. “That one was working on the kids.”

He blanched, looking from me to the pipes to Oomy. “Oops.” Taking a deep breath, he said, “Okay, let me try something different.”

This time, when he started to play, the music was lower, quicker, softer, the notes seeming to slink along the ground, growing more and more urgent as Horst continued to coax them from the pipes.

I’d heard him play before, felt the haunting magic of his music.

But this was something entirely different.

The song he played made me feel as if I’d just walked through a spiderweb, as though I could actually feel the notes sliding over my skin.

I rubbed my upper arms just to get the feeling off me.

But despite my discomfort, it seemed to be working.

As I watched, rats began to scurry past me.

First a baby rat, then another baby, then Cookie.

They moved as if in a trance, heading straight for their cage.

I counted the rats as they streamed by me, the tension in my spine easing as Cupcake, the fifteenth and final rat, climbed into the cage.

The notes of Horst's song faded away as I closed the cage door, double-checking that it was latched, and clicked the lock around the handles.

It was over. Horst had saved me.

Again.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

Despite Roger's secret attempt to curse the café's first birthday party, the final thirty minutes went off without a hitch. There was cake. Kids drank lemonade. Gifts were opened. No rodents met their gruesome end by tooth or claw.

And, most importantly, it ended.

After Andi had wrapped her arms around my waist, squeezed, and said, "That was the best party ever," and Julia told me she was thrilled with how everything had gone—despite the cool look she gave my apron—I walked them to the door, locking up once they had gotten into their car.

I could not deal with one more hiccup. Not even a small one. The café was going to be closed for the rest of the day so I could decompress and also work on packing up that glitter bomb for Roger.

I traipsed back into the cat area and collapsed on the couch near the rat cage, stretching my legs out in front of me. Horst had hung back when I led the kids to the café for cake and presents, and he remained in front of the rat cage, studying the lock closely.

"How did this door end up open?" he asked.

The cats drifted in, clearly optimistic about persuading me to open the last of the treats. "I don't know," I said, petting little Cecil, a one-eyed cat with a stumpy tail. "I assume one of the kids opened it without understanding why it was closed."

"But it was locked," Horst pointed out.

“Maybe I forgot to lock it.”

He turned and leveled his honeyed gaze at me. “You? Glory O’Bryan, you double-check every lock you come across.” He jabbed one finger toward the lock. “I guarantee you didn’t forget to lock this before a group of kids came through.”

I tried to suppress the feeling of unease that ran through me. “But I was distracted. My princess showed up sick, so I had to find an emergency replacement.”

The corner of his mouth kicked up. “Resourceful. Who’d you rope into that?”

“Ah, puppy. You made it. I was afraid you might miss the party.”

I looked up to see Quill had managed to once again sneak up on us.

She’d changed back into her own silvery blue dress and removed the wig and tiara, although she still had traces of cream blush on her cheeks and her pale eyes looked even paler thanks to a thick coating of mascara on her spidery lashes.

Oomy slipped back into Horst’s shirt pocket, tucking herself away as the color drained from his face. “Glory O’Bryan,” he said, “tell me you didn’t ask Quill to play a princess at a kids’ party.”

I got to my feet. “I know it seems like a terrible idea, but it turned out really well. She was actually a fantastic princess.”

Quill’s small face glowed. “Do you hear that, puppy? I was fantastic.”

But Horst didn’t look like he was happy for me. “You asked Quill for a favor?”

“She was the only one here,” I said, starting to get annoyed. “And she agreed to do

it.”

“I was very obliging.” Quill slipped past me to plop down on the couch. The cats who’d been so interested in seeing if I had any more treats quickly retreated to the other rooms.

Horst grabbed my elbow and pulled me after them. “You can’t ask for favors from Quill,” he said in a low voice, darting glances over my head as if to ensure that the Unseelie queen hadn’t followed us.

“Why not?”

“Because now you owe her something. You can’t ask the fae for favors.”

It struck me that Horst was also fae, bound by the same laws that Quill was. “I asked you for a favor and you didn’t warn me not to do that.”

“Yes, because the things I’ll ask of you in return are things like blowjobs or dressing up like Mimi from the Drew Carey Show in bed. I won’t—”

“Hold on.” I held up one hand. “Mimi?”

He froze. “This is a judgment-free zone,” he said stiffly.

“Sure, sure.” I laced my fingers together in front of me. “But how big is this zone? Can I walk to the door over there and make fun of you? Because I really, really want to.”

He threw his hands up. “Hey, I like her eyeshadow and her confidence.” Then he shook his head. “But that’s not the point. The point is that now you owe Quill a favor, and she’s going to collect. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But someday.

And you're obligated to do what she asks."

I moved past him, walking through the doorway until I could see Quill perched on the couch, swinging her legs back and forth and humming a jaunty little tune to herself. She reminded me more of the kids from the birthday party than some villainous creature I should be afraid of.

"What could she possibly ask of me that would be so terrible?" I asked Horst quietly.

"Don't let her fool you—she's capable of terrible things. You never, ever ask a favor of Quill. I would rather die than owe her something."

At that moment, the Unseelie queen turned her head and smiled at us, revealing a mouthful of pointy teeth. "I'm sorry you don't find me helpful, puppy," she said. Then, in a singsong voice, she added, "But you will soon."

Horst brought his hands to his hips. "If she was here, that explains how the rats wound up loose. It would be easy for a member of the fae to get that lock open while you weren't paying attention."

That made Quill laugh. "Oh, puppy. Do you think I would stoop to simple pranks? No, this was not my doing. Though you're right about one thing—it is easy for the fae to get locks open."

I wasn't sure what exactly did it, but everything about Horst's demeanor changed.

What sparkle remained in his eyes through our conversation about Quill faded away as he hunched his shoulders forward, his hands closing into fists at his sides.

Something passed between him and Quill, some kind of fairy communication that was, as a bystander, kind of annoying.

Finally, he said, “Why are you here, Quill?”

She leaned back against the cushions, stretching her arms out along the back of the couch. “You know why.”

It appeared he did because, without taking his eyes from Quill, he said, “Glory, I want you to head over to the Enchanted Forest.”

I blinked. He was kicking me out of my own café? “What—?”

“Now.”

I’d never heard his voice so harsh before, and a chill washed over me. I wished he would tell me what was going on.

Hell, I wished he would even look at me.

But he refused to meet my eyes.

It was Quill who finally broke the silence.

“I fear, puppy, that you are already too late.”

Horst shook his head. “No, I can—”

“She’s right, Piper,” a deep voice said from the door to the café. “You’re out of time.”

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

The new arrival was of average height, average build, and average hair color, something I hadn't appreciated until I saw it for myself.

I made a mental note to apologize to Emma for doubting her description of this guy.

The only notable thing about him was the gray cape flapping over his shoulders, despite the absence of wind.

He was so bland, in fact, that it seemed almost deliberate, as though, like Horst, he put on an invisible mask every day that shielded his true self from curious eyes.

And then, as if to prove me right, he stepped forward and everything about him shifted. The nondescript figure that had been right in front of me shimmered and dissolved, leaving behind a tall, thin man with a face as sharp as a knife blade. His pupils were black slits, more reptilian than human.

He's not human, I realized.

"Where is my brooch, Piper?"

Horst had whirled around at the newcomer's sudden entrance, his body tense, but now he relaxed, rocking back on his heels. "Dirchan! Long time no see. How've you been?"

"Missing my brooch. Where is it?"

"Oh, come on, Dirch. I don't see you for ages, and you storm in here demanding a

silly piece of jewelry?

Tell you what—why don't we sit down and have some cupcakes, and we can get all caught up.

This place makes amazing cupcakes. Have you tried them?

” He turned to look at me. “Glory, why don't you go grab us some cupcakes and coffee.

Dirch, you still using oat milk in your coffee? ”

His tone was light, but his eyes were deadly serious as they met mine. The message was clear: He wanted me to run.

But, like, not until I was out of sight of this creepy guy.

“Enough!” Dirchan snapped. “Your mortal friend will not be going anywhere until you give me back what you stole from me.”

“Stole?” Horst slipped his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “You wound me, Dirch. I merely borrowed a trinket from a friend. I would never steal from you.”

Dirchan's lips twisted in a sneer of disbelief. “It was not a trinket, as you say, and you will return it at once.”

Quill rubbed her hands together. “Would you like my help now, puppy?”

“Stay out of this,” he said. To Dirchan, he said, “I have it back at my place. If you want to come with me, we can get it now.”

Dirchan's eyes flashed, and his body began to grow distorted, stretching and lengthening.

Oh, he really wasn't human.

I heard a squeak and looked over at the rat cage, where all fifteen rats were staring at the figure that now loomed over Horst. It was hard to be sure from this distance, and they were, you know, rodents so not super expressive, but if a rat could be said to look terrified, then these rats looked terrified.

And it wasn't hard to see why. Because Dirchan wasn't just fae.

He was some kind of shapeshifting fae. And at that moment, he had shifted into a snake.

A giant snake with a gray hood spreading out from either side of its face, and cruel intelligence glinting in its slitted eyes.

"I've given you all the chances you're going to get, Piper," he hissed.

"Dirch, let's just talk about this." Horst was taking small side steps, and I realized he was trying to put himself between the immense serpent and me.

"We are talking," the snake said in the same creepy, stomach-churning voice I'd heard on the phone. "My mother was the most important person in the world to me."

"I know, and I'm sorry I borrowed the brooch. But when you said it was a very powerful magical object, you failed to mention that it had been made from your mother's ashes."

I closed my eyes. Horst had told me he travels around procuring—usually through

illegal means—magical objects that he then uses to try to restore the kobolds to their true form.

What he plans to do with the kids once they are back to being human, he couldn't say.

But that was what he used magical objects for.

Not just used. Used up . That was what he had told me, anyway.

And it appeared he'd used up the wrong object.

"I will have my mother back, Piper, or I will take the most important person in the world to you."

I opened my eyes to find the snake's gaze pinning me in place. I was only able to tear my eyes away when Horst grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me, hard. "Run, Glory!" he said. "Go, now!"

But there was no time. The snake struck out, not with its mouth but with its tail, batting Horst out of the way before curling nimbly around my neck and lifting me to the ceiling, where I dangled, feet kicking helplessly.

"Dirchan, you can't do this!" Horst shouted, grabbing for what he could reach of the snake's body.

"I want my mother back," Dirchan said, his voice raspy with anger and malice and what sounded a bit like grief. If he hadn't been in the process of choking the life out of me at that moment, I would have felt sorry for him.

Horst pulled his pipes from his pocket and started to play, but Dirchan merely

laughed as he used a coil of his snaky body to send the pipes flying.

“That may work on rats and kobolds, Piper, but I’m immune to your pathetic piping.

Now, get me my mother, or I will squeeze the life out of this puny human. ”

Quill chose that moment to get to her feet, stretching her back as though she had just finished watching a long movie. “Well, puppy, it looks like you have this well in hand.”

I was pretty sure my face was turning purple. It certainly felt purple.

This was the second time since I’d met the Pied Piper that I’d found myself being strangled by some paranormal creature.

Something to discuss with Roger. If I survived.

And after I sent him that glitter bomb.

Horst looked around him, his face frantic even through the haze that fuzzed my vision. “Glory, hold on! I’ll...I’ll think of something.” But from the way his voice broke at the end, I had a feeling he didn’t have much of a something to think up.

And then, as the world started to go black around the edges, I heard him say, “Okay, Quill. Please. I need your help. Save her. I’ll do anything.”

I would rather die than owe her something . That was what he’d said earlier.

“Why, this is a surprise,” Quill said, her voice a study in feigned shock. “You want my help, puppy? I thought—”

“Quill, she’s dying!”

The Unseelie queen’s mouth curled in displeasure, probably annoyed that she wasn’t going to get to toy with Horst for as long as she wanted. But she fluffed the skirts of her dress and wiggled her fingers as though some impressive magic was about to happen.

“Mortal, I do hope you’re not dead yet. I’m going to need you to throw me what you have in your pocket.”

What I had in my pocket? The pressure around my throat was lessening, and I had a feeling that was more because I was losing consciousness and not because Dirchan was having a change of heart. My hands brushed numbly at my pockets. There it was—the brooch Bathsheba had found for me.

But it was just an ordinary brooch. It certainly didn’t have the ashes of this shapeshifting creature’s mother embedded in it. It was just an onyx stone surrounded by silver scrollwork, just as Horst had described. There was no magic there.

If that was Quill’s plan, I was as good as dead.

“Mortal, I don’t have all day,” Quill said testily, holding out her hand below me. “And frankly, you look like you don’t have more than a minute or two left, so chop-chop.”

My fingers struggled to follow my brain’s commands, but I managed to reach into my pocket and pull out the very ordinary, very non-magical brooch. I was in no shape to toss it to Quill. The best I could do was let it slip from my fingers and hope she caught it.

Her hand moved faster than I would have imagined possible—or maybe I was at the

point where I was just seeing things—closing over the brooch before it could hit the ground.

“I don’t feel my mother here,” Dirchan rumbled. “What trick are you trying to pull, Piper?”

“You don’t feel your mother because your idiot friend put a cloaking spell on it,” Quill said. “Just give me a moment to remove it.”

Her lips moved, and I could feel a trickle of frigid air rising from her closed fist. There was a flash of light in a truly stomach-churning shade of purple, and then she opened her hand. “Here you go, puppy,” she said, tossing him the brooch.

“Dirchan,” Horst shouted. “I have your brooch. Let Glory go immediately or I will destroy it for good.”

The snake unloosed its coils without warning, and I would have fallen gracelessly to the floor had I not been caught in a strong pair of arms.

Unfortunately, they were Quill’s and not Horst’s, but beggars can’t be choosers.

Quill looked like she felt the same way, dumping me onto my feet as quickly as she could. “You owe me for that one, too, mortal,” she said.

I sucked in a lungful of air, rubbing at the raw skin of my throat. “I didn’t ask you to catch me,” I said. “So I can’t owe you anything.” I wasn’t sure how the fine print of fae interactions went, I had to assume there were rules.

She sighed. “It was worth a try,” she said, brushing her dress to remove whatever mortal cooties she thought I carried.

Dirchan, meanwhile, shrank back to his human form so quickly I could almost believe I'd imagined that he had been a snake.

He snatched the brooch from Horst's fingers, his face blurring between his true knife-edge form and the bland mask I'm pretty sure he wore most of the time.

"Mommy," he whispered, bringing the brooch up to his cheek.

Where he snuggled it .

Horst's face was still pale, but he was rapidly sliding back into his normal self. "So, Dirch, we're all good then?"

Dirchan's face snapped back to his haughty, cruel persona, and he fastened the brooch carefully onto the collar of his cape.

"Steal from me again, Piper, and there is nothing that can save you." Then he spun on one heel and stalked out of the cat area.

I heard a door slam, and the air itself brightened as the shapeshifting monster walked out of our lives.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am

“It was great to see you again,” Horst called after Dirchan. “All the best to your family.” Then he bent at the waist, hands on his knees while he breathed deeply for several beats before straightening up.

“Quill,” he said. “Thank you. Truly.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, my hands—and voice—still shaky from the oxygen deprivation. “That was just a regular brooch. Why did he believe it was his mother?”

“Quill did...something.” Horst looked to the Unseelie queen, one eyebrow raised. “Some kind of masking spell, right?”

“Foolish of you both to assume I don’t always have the ashes of powerful dead fae on my person for just such an emergency,” Quill said tartly.

Then she turned with a flounce of her skirts.

“Now, as enjoyable as this has been, I am done with you. But I very much look forward to collecting on what you both owe me. This is, as you mortals would say, quite a dear diary moment.”

Honestly, at that point, I was relieved to see the back of her. Knowing Quill, if she’d been eager to stick around, it would have meant even more disaster was headed our way.

And I really, really could not take one more disaster that day.

“Come on,” Horst said, leading me to the café section and guiding me to a chair. “You should drink something. It’ll help your throat.”

He loaded a glass with ice, then filled it with pink lemonade before setting it on the table in front of me.

I took a long sip, the cold lemonade easing the burn in my throat. “You asked Quill for a favor.”

Horst got one of the unused saucers and put a couple cookies on it. He carried it over, sat down across from me, and slid the plate over. “Yes,” he said. “I did.”

“You said we should never ask Quill for favors,” I pointed out. “You said you would rather die than owe her.”

“And I would rather owe her than let anything happen to you.” He reached across the table and took my hand in his. “I am so sorry. I never meant for you to get caught up in all that.”

“Who was that guy?”

“Dirchan is a mortician in a small town in Oklahoma. He mostly caters to magical families.” Oomy climbed out of his pocket and chittered at him encouragingly.

“You might think I’m a terrible person for stealing from him, but quite a few magical objects passed through his funeral home and he helped himself to anything that struck his fancy.

He isn’t such a great guy himself. I don’t think he would have cared about me stealing from him if I hadn’t accidentally stolen the brooch he’d made using his mother’s ashes. ”

“Accidentally?”

He waved his free hand. “Fine—I purposefully stole the brooch. I just hadn’t realized it was so powerful because his mother’s power was trapped in it.”

“But the brooch you gave him wasn’t the actual brooch. Won’t he look at it later and realize it’s not the same?”

“Oh, come on.” He smiled fondly at me. “You know how men are. You think he ever actually looked at it? As long as he felt his mother’s presence—and whatever spell Quill did on it made sure he did—then he’s satisfied.”

I considered trying a cookie, but opted for another sip of lemonade instead. “Why’d you break into the pawn shop instead of just going during business hours? And why did you take me along?”

He turned his face away, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck. “I’m not actually allowed inside Clyde’s anymore. His wife is a big fan of my lotions, and Clyde may have misunderstood the meaning of some of her social media hashtags.”

“Like #ILikeBigPipes?”

“Something like that.” He had the decency to look a teeny bit ashamed. But only for a moment. Brightening, he added, “And I took you along partly because I was trying to keep you safe, but mostly because I thought it was a pretty damn romantic date night.”

Well, he was right about that. Still, I wished he’d just been open with me. “Why didn’t you just tell me what was going on?”

He sighed. “Because I thought the less you knew, the safer you would be. Obviously, I was very wrong. I’m sorry he targeted you.

I never thought he would stoop to breaking windows and opening rat cages, let alone try to hurt you.

” He was quiet for a moment, and then his eyes lit up.

“But even without me talking about it, you still managed to figure out how to help me by finding a suitable replacement brooch. You know why that is, Glory O’Bryan? ”

I squinted at him. “Because I overheard you talking at the antique store?”

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that. The correct answer is because we’re BFFs.” He brought my hand to his lips, kissing my fingertips. “I noticed you haven’t been wearing the necklace I got you.”

“I—” My voice caught in my throat. I had no idea how to finish that sentence.

I wasn’t sure whether it was just a gag gift.

I didn’t know if you would think I take our relationship more seriously than you do.

I don’t know what the term BFF means to you.

I couldn’t say any of that to him, and not just because my throat still felt too raw for a “where is this going” conversation about a relationship that, had I been updating my Facebook status, would have absolutely been classified as “It’s complicated.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I think I figured out why.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but he put his thumb on my bottom lip to stop me. “It’s because you don’t want just a BFF necklace. You want something more.”

Getting to his feet, he reached into the pocket of his jeans. “I got you something,” he

whispered. “Something a lot more significant than a BFF necklace.”

Something more significant than a BFF necklace?

OMG. Was he about to...was he going to propose ?

My mind whirled. How could this be happening? We barely knew each other. Although, really, we’d been through some pretty major crises together. If marriage was for better or worse, we’d already run that gamut in just the first few weeks we’d known each other.

“Glory O’Bryan,” he said, his face very serious. “I would be honored if you would wear this.”

With that he held up his hand and opened his fingers, from which dangled a very sparkly, very big...

Heart-shaped necklace.

When I say it was sparkly and big, I mean this thing was the size of a golf ball, and the deep, full red of a ruby, edged in tiny diamonds. As I watched, the two halves of the heart separated.

I stared at it, both mesmerized and confused. “Is that another BFF necklace?” I asked.

“No.”

“Because it looks like another BFF necklace.”

“It’s not a BFF necklace.” He held it closer. “See? It’s a VBFF necklace.”

“VBFF?”

“ Very Best Friends Forever.” He held one half of the heart out to me. It dangled from a thick, bright gold chain that looked like it would absolutely turn my neck green in hours. “I think we’ve gone beyond BFFs.”

“Did you steal this too?”

“Glory O’Bryan! Of course not. You were so concerned about the fact that I might have.

..let’s go with lifted the last one that I knew better than to steal anything nice for you.

” He flashed me a knowing grin. “I got this out of one of those little machines at the grocery store. For a quarter, if you can believe it.”

I could. I could very much believe it.

But when he clasped the necklace around my neck, the cheap half heart glowed with a brilliant light and I felt the tingle of magic.

For a man who stole pretty much everything he wanted, the fact that he’d bought this for me meant something.

Maybe it had just been a quarter, but it was something.

And it meant even more when he dropped the other half of the heart into his shirt pocket, patting it gently. “There,” he said. “It’s safe with the other one.”

The other one.

“You keep the other BFF necklace in your pocket?” I asked.

“Of course. It’s where I keep everything that matters to me—my pipes, Oomy, and

now you.”

I blinked, trying to hide the tears that threatened to well up. Maybe Roger was right that my complicated relationship with my sister had made me need extra reassurance from friends and romantic partners, and I was sure that was something I would keep working on with him in the future.

But maybe I also needed to work on recognizing that reassurance when I received it.

Horst had made a deal with the devil—well, Quill—in order to save me.

He’d figured out how to lead my rats out of danger and back into their cage.

And he’d purchased the world’s tackiest—and somehow most beautiful—necklace for me because I hadn’t worn the first one he’d given me.

Something to keep in mind. If I didn’t wear this necklace, he was likely to find something even worse.

He reached out his hands for mine. When he had hold of both of them, he pulled me to my feet. Carefully tucking my hair behind my ears, he scanned my face and whispered, “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

And then he kissed me, the kind of kiss that had us awkwardly fumbling our way through the door to the cat section, headed for my apartment.

We’d made it halfway through the cat area when we heard it: the scratch-scratch of a cat in a litter box.

Followed—of course—by the unmistakable sound of a cat in intestinal distress.

The treats had finally done their damage.

Horst lifted his head, out of breath from our mobile make-out session. “Is that...?”

“Cat diarrhea? Yeah.”

He rested his brow against mine, still breathing hard. “How incredibly romantic.”

“I mean, it’s no princess bouncy castle,” I said, loving the way I could feel his chuckle rumble through his chest when I was pressed against him. “I’m going to have to take care of that.”

He groaned but released me. “I’ll help you.”

“You’re going to help me deal with a dirty litter box?” I asked.

He fiddled with the sparkling heart around my neck. “I’m just as surprised as you are. But I’m not going to let you deal with the hard stuff by yourself.”

The tears threatened again, and I would have pulled him down for another kiss had the room not smelled like I’d let a bunch of six-year-olds give unlimited lickable treats to ten cats.

Another terrible decision.

But having someone to help me clean up the consequences of my bad decisions sure did make it feel less terrible.