

And for my Next Trick!

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Holly had a week's worth of vacation in Las Vegas, but she had bought the non-refundable tickets when she had a boyfriend to travel with. Now, not so much. She had tried to round up another friend to come with her, but the list she had at hand was rather short, and so, after three days in Vegas, Holly found herself alone in a bar. Her chin rested on her hand and she looked at a wall through the fuzzy haze of a buzz and slightly crossed eyes. She didn't even think much, because invariably her thoughts turned to the drek her life had become, and no happy ending could come from that.

She took another sip from her beer mug and washed the bitter amber liquid down as quickly as she could. Then a presence invaded the space right next to her. A witch sat on the stool next to her. But even wearing a long pointy hat, black gown, and striped purple tights was not enough to hold anyone's attention in a Vegas casino, and Holly turned back to her wall.

"Just water, Drusilla?" The bartender asked.

"Yeah, you know the drill." The witch replied, and though Holly couldn't fathom water costing anything to pour, the woman still slapped a twenty dollar bill on the bar. The barman scooped it up and handed Drusilla a mug of crystal water. The woman took it and pulled a small vial from somewhere in her dress. She

gave the water just a taste of the violet liquid, and a puff of smoke shot from the mug. It was an acrid, o-zone smelling fog, and the water had turned a pinkish color. Now the witch had Holly's attention.

Drusilla waved the lingering smoke away, then took a deep breath from the mug and sighed. She took a drink. A smile spread across her face. "Yum," she said.

"So what was it today?" The barman asked, just as interested as Holly.

"Strawberries, with a hint of cherry."

The barman nodded, and his curiosity satisfied, moved on down the bar. Holly remained transfixed on the mug of pinkish water, a fact that Drusilla took notice to.

"I change the ingredients every day. Never the same thing twice. One time, I had a full meal of duck, roasted of course, stuffing, and Chianti. But, then I drank something that tasted a little like a headache, which I suppose is a bit of an oxymoron. Don't know how I managed that. But then, I did fail potions class. Anyway, you seem sad."

Holly took a long moment to process the witch's speech, while Drusilla eagerly awaited a reply.

"Boyfriend dumped me," she said.

"Oh, there's a million fish in the sea. Less in that mug, I think, but just go swimming and you're bound to find one. Still, I've been there. Dated a warlock once; he was a bit batty, but I think that's because his father was a vampire. I cried for days after he was eaten by a hawk."

"Oh."

"Exactly. Now, I have to go. My next show starts in half an hour just down the way. Can't miss it." The witch flicked her wrist and a card popped into her hand, which she gave to Holly. One side read 'Drusilla the Witch, Entertainer and Scholar' the other side just had 'Rumplefuzzle.' "Really, I think you look darling. So just come on down, say the magic word, and I'll bring you up on stage. My last assistant bolted after I 'accidentally'

turned her into a fairy, so I'm always on the lookout for volunteers." The witch downed her pink drink, and hopped off her seat. "Ta ta," She said, and swayed out of the bar.

Holly turned back to her wall, letting the witch fall into the haze of the past.

Twenty minutes later, Holly was in just the same sad place she had been in all day. The card Drusilla gave her sat unattended next to the beer mug, cast in an amber shade from the lighting. The barman was cleaning up the area around Holly.

"You really should go, you know. It's a great show."

"I like beer better than magic."

The barman nodded and deftly took Holly's mug away.

"Hey, I paid for that!"

"I'll give it back to you after you go see the magic show."

Holly began to protest, but he held up a finger to stop her.

"And if you come back – and haven't had a good time, I'll give you anything on the house as long as you're in Vegas."

"Fine." She grumbled, taking her coat, the card, and dragging her feet out of the bar. Holly followed the signs to the 'Drusilla Magic Show,' fully expecting to come back this same way with the grim knowledge that she could drink herself into oblivion for free. There weren't many crowds this way, but she felt an undeniable excitement as she neared the doors to the theater. It felt . . . after some searching, Holly arrived at the word 'pink.' She moved over to the ticket booth, and was only half surprised to see a girl with cat's ears and a leotard manning the counter.

“How much is it?” Holly asked.

“Are you the girl she met in the bar?” The catgirl asked.

“How did you know?”

“She told me to look out for a moeey brown-haired girl. I’ll just need to see the card.”

Holly pulled it from her coat pocket and handed it to the cat, who purred lightly as she worked. The catgirl took it, gave it a light tap with a wand, and the card turned from white to purple. She handed it back. “Go on in, and don’t forget to say the magic word. It will turn your whole life around.”

Holly nodded and went to the doors, just barely catching a glance of the catgirl taking a sip from a glass of milk. There was a doorman who checked Holly’s ticket and told her to sit along the front row. She wasn’t surprised that he had amber-golden eyes and perked wolf’s ears. The theater she entered looked like a spacious medieval tower lined with bookshelves and candles. There was even an arched ‘window’ to the outside, revealing a dragon attacking a castle. The seats, though, were thankfully more modern and comfortable than one might find in a medieval castle.

With just two minutes left before the show, Holly would have had a hard time finding a seat, except for the few left open on the front row, where she had been instructed to sit. She had just set her coat down front and center when the candles dimmed and the curtain rose, revealing a backdrop of stars. One particular constellation was at the heart of it all, and made the shape of a witch’s face with a pointy hat and nose. Holly swore she saw a speck of light move in the field, and then became sure of it.

Slowly, this light at the heart of the backdrop became larger and larger, and eventually turned left, so that Holly could get a perfect look at a witch riding a broomstick, but from what seemed like many yards away. The silhouette vanished off stage left, then reappeared larger just a second later. Tracking across the stage, it vanished past the curtain on the right side, and then Drusilla burst into what could only be the stage itself, riding a broom as if it was a normal thing. She set herself down to mild applause and curtsied to the crowd.

“Thank you all for coming. I am Drusilla the Witch.” The broom stood up behind her, and began to imitate her motions as best it could. The witch pretended not to notice. “First, before I begin, I’d like to take care of a small matter. Should any of you come across a fairy who responds to the name Nancy, please tell her I found the antidote and that she should contact me as soon as possible.” There was a confused murmur in the crowd, but Holly, who had seen too much already, knew better than to doubt the witch.

“As I said, I am Drusilla. I’ve been practicing magic all my life, and graduated top of my class at Periwinkle University.” The broom behind her shook its top back and forth. The witch caught this and glared at the broom, but Holly knew, as the broom most certainly did, that she failed potions. “Still, a magician isn’t anything without an assistant.” The broom jumped up and down, waving wildly. Drusilla looked at it for a moment, waved her hand, and the broom broke into a hundred chopsticks that hovered in the air for a moment and then sped off stage. “Anyway, I know that there is one person in the audience who knows the magic word and can come up here to assist me for the night.”

Holly looked around nervously, hoping Drusilla had given a few other people cards. Everyone else, however, was looking around just as much as she. When no one spoke up, the witch looked right at Holly, whose cheeks and neck became cherry red. “All she needs to do is say the magic word.” Hurriedly, Holly grabbed her coat and dug into her pocket, then the other. All eyes were now on her, and she had stage fright.

“I swear, you can’t get good help these days.” Holly finally found the card and held it up triumphantly. “Well, say the magic word.” Drusilla implored. Wanting nothing more than the embarrassment to end, Holly looked at the card.

“Rumplefizzle.” She shouted, but nothing happened. She read the card again. “Oh! Rumplefuzzle!” An explosion of smoke surrounded Holly, and a moment later she was standing on stage, coughing. Drusilla walked over to her and gave her a reassuring pat.

“What’s your name?” She asked, holding a microphone up.

“Uh, it’s, uh, Holly.”

“What a wonderful name, Holly. But, I don’t think you’re quite ready to be my assistant. Do you know why that is?”

Holly shook her head and glanced back at the audience.

“Well, you haven’t a costume. Not a problem, however, because I can get one for you with just a quick trick –” Drusilla took a pinch of Holly’s shirt, “I give you Holly the Jolly Jester!” she yanked on the shirt, and Holly’s clothes exploded in a shower of purple lights, leaving behind an airy jester costume of purple and red with a collar of tassels and bells and green tights. She even had gold shoes that curled at the toes.

“Much better. Now, are you ready, Holly?”

Holly looked from the colorful costume to Drusilla, who eagerly awaited a reply, then back to the audience, whom she swore was beginning to fall asleep, and something triggered in her. Be bold, she told herself, so Holly posed for the crowd and put on her first genuine smile in days.

“Miss Drusilla,” she said, “let’s make magic.”

With no reason to be bashful at this point, Holly broke out of a shell she never knew she had. She became quick witted and punny, responding to Drusilla almost before the witch had finished speaking. And the witch encouraged this through little nods or winks. The tricks themselves always began simply, much like any run of the mill magician could perform, but at the last moment, Drusilla put her own true magical touch to work. One such instance was when the witch instructed her assistant into a simple box, and proceeded to “saw” off Holly’s head, arms, and legs. The jester had complete faith in Drusilla, and at no point did she worry something was to go awry. After quickly showing the audience that Holly was indeed sawed into six parts, Drusilla proceeded to put her back together.

Of course, being who she was, the reformation process didn't actually take, and so, when she opened the door for Holly to step out, the Jester instead fell to the ground, still in pieces. Her head rolled toward the front of the stage before the witch deftly picked it up.

"Oh my, oh my." Holly remarked dryly, "I have fallen to pieces. Whatever will happen to me."

Drusilla laughed, but occupied herself by whisking a piece of string into existence and tying it to the jester's head. She threw it into the air, where it wrapped itself around a beam of wood, allowing Holly's head to sway in the air. Drusilla then went back and picked up Holly's torso, and strung it up in the same manner. Her arms and legs followed after, and after a minute of deft magic, Holly's joints were hanging disparate from each other from a wooden handle. But the witch tapped Holly's chest with a wand, and all her pieces came together perfectly, though with the help of pins.

"Well, how do you feel, Holly?"

"A little stiff," Holly replied, as she looked at her body, which had turned to wood at some point during the act while hadn't been looking. Drusilla flicked her wand to unhook the marionette handle from the ceiling, and Holly immediately toppled to the ground, arms and legs splayed everywhere.

"Oh my, are you OK? Give us a wave if you are."

The marionette did try to, but her stringed arm didn't move at all, so Drusilla picked up the string and made the puppet's hand wave for her. With a flick of her wand, the handle itself began to shake and bobble into the air, pulling strings and Holly's body up with it until she was standing upright. She could move now, and admired the beautiful craftsmanship of her body, sanded and polished so the woodlines were nearly invisible. She rapped on her wooden chest and felt the knocking echo through her body.

"We're waiting on you, Holly." Drusilla said. The jester looked up and smiled again, satisfied with her new body.

"Well, what are you waiting for, I'm just a toy?"

And the show continued on.

Thirty minutes later, Holly lay back on a couch in Drusilla's dressing room, her unfamiliar wooden and jointed body flopping to the side a little. She looked across the dressing room to herself in a mirror, still astonished at the jester marionette staring back at her. It was difficult to feel sad while wearing such a happy costume, and Holly had left even her most worrisome sorrows behind in her old body.

The door sprung open and Drusilla glided through it, black dress swishing to and fro. She spun about to face Holly, her face a light bulb of radiance.

"Oh, my dear Holly, you were absolutely terrific out there tonight. What show, what spectacle. Never before have I had such a wonderful assistant."

Holly wanted to reply, but had no means to open her wooden mouth.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Sometimes I don't know where my head flies off to. It just gets away from me and I never see it again. It really is a bad – oh, right." Drusilla flicked her hand, and Holly's marionette controls rose into the air, hovering a foot beneath the ceiling, and she found that she could now move.

"Miss Drusilla, thank you for tonight. It was exhilarating," the marionette said. "But I was wondering when will you turn me back?"

"Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about, Holly. You can say the magic word whenever you want and you will return to your human form. But, I really do believe you have a calling in this profession, and I was wondering if you could be persuaded to stay on for a little while and help with my show."

Holly stood up and noticed that her strings always remained taught. It was her handles, not her body, which moved, and she merely obeyed. The jester looked down at her bright and airy costume, the silliness of which had seeped into her, making the marionette smile just a bit more.

“How much would I be paid?”

“100 dollars of monopoly money a night.”

“Medical and dental?”

“None, but you are flame-proof and saw proof.”

“Room and board?”

“I have a box ready that you will fit in perfectly, once you get folded up.”

“So what’s the upside?”

“You’ll be the world’s only living marionette and you will help make magic real.”

Holly took a closer look at her wooden body in the mirror. The bright, never changing smile and irreverent costume seeped silliness into her character. The woman who had sat alone in a bar while drinking her pain away was a different person, but Holly had the feeling that if she left now, she would become that woman again.

“Miss Drusilla, I’m ready for my next trick!”