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One Man's Treasure

A Novelette by
Sarah Pinsker

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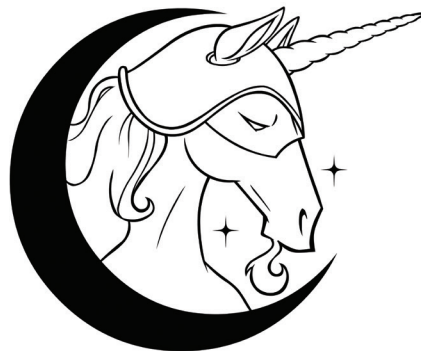
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by Sarah Pinsker

Aden had never once forgotten his gear for bulk trash day, but he found it touching that Nura still taped a monthly reminder note on the door from the kitchen to the garage. Sweet of her to remember, given how exhausted med school had her these days. He ducked out to the garage to toss gloves, a mask, and protective goggles into his pickup. The city didn't provide the mask or goggles; those were from his own personal stash.

While the water for his coffee warmed, he fished in the junk drawer, hoping to find some tiny unexpired dollar-store charm he could leave to make Nura smile. A flying kiss, maybe, though that would leave her scrubbing lipstick off her cheek, or spark powder, or something similarly innocuous and cute. He didn't find anything, so he wrote "I love you" on the blank side of her note to him and left it on her open copy of *Rapid Interpretation of Magicardiograms*.

Four a.m. was a special hour, Aden thought as he navigated the sleeping streets of Three Rivers. The moon hung low in the sky, three days past full, and nobody was outside doing any incantations, which left him, his travel mug of bracing black coffee, and a moment of solitude before his noisy workday routine began.

On normal days he parked in the yard, but on bulk day, everyone who'd been around long enough to know better parked down on the street; once you got back into the yard you weren't supposed to take anything, and you couldn't divert the truck, but if you found something worth keeping and it happened to fall into your private vehicle on the way home at shift's end, well, that was just a perk of the job. He'd built in a few minutes to hoof it up the hill from outside the gate and still clock in on time.

No matter when Aden arrived, Nash always arrived earlier. He was already leaning against the garbage truck waiting, keys in hand, looking

as usual like he'd just stepped off a photoshoot for a grizzled mountain man calendar, all plaid and beard, even though to Aden's knowledge he'd never left the city of Three Rivers. He and Aden both wordlessly hauled themselves into the cab, then pulled toques over closed eyes to wait for the new guy. They had been working together long enough that neither felt compelled to say anything over the din of the other trucks clattering off toward the sleeping city.

The new guy on their crew, Renny, ascribed to a broad definition of punctuality; eleven minutes after everyone else had rolled out, he strolled in as if nobody was waiting for him. Aden opened his eyes when he heard Renny greet Ms. Jukes, their supervisor. She'd left her office to greet him, or maybe to see why their truck was still there, but she didn't reprimand him. How did some people get away with flouting rules when everyone else had to abide by them? The unfairness irked him, even though he liked the kid.

Renny put one foot on the running board, then noticed the goggles Aden had pushed up on his forehead. "Wait, is today bulk? Crap. Lemme go home and grab the rest of my gear."

Behind him, Ms. Jukes said, "You don't have time. You're the last ones out already."

Renny looked around like he had just noticed theirs was the only truck. "Okay, how about we drive past my place on the way out?" He smiled at her, not flirting, but clearly working his considerable charm, a storybook prince in overalls.

She returned the smile. "You know the truck's GPS reports if you go off route. Or if you're late, which you already are. Get moving."

Aden couldn't help standing up for the kid, even if the tardiness and the charm-assault annoyed him. "If the city issued us safety equipment, he wouldn't have to run home for his own personal gear."

"Or protection spells?" Renny added helpfully.

Ms. Jukes frowned. "They're not my rules, but you know the regs only say to wear your gloves and follow Worksafe guidelines. And the

city definitely doesn't have budget for any spell that would provide real protection. That's big ticket magic. Y'all need to go."

Renny nodded and pulled on his gloves. They still looked newish; he'd only been on the job six weeks, their third new trainee since Blue's accident. Blue's death couldn't have been avoided with ten layers of gloves and goggles.

Aden and Renny rode to Old Hog alongside Nash in the truck's cab. Old Hog was the poorer of the two neighborhoods that formed their current route, and the easier. Only the usual problems, like off-brand trash bags that split when you lifted them. The city kept talking about getting trucks with lift arms to dump bins directly, but then they'd have to give everyone fancy new cans too, which wasn't in the budget. Anyway, that didn't matter on bulk day.

When they reached the first block of their route, Aden and Renny dropped to the ground and set into their rhythm, Aden on the driver's side, Renny on the opposite. If the monthly bulk day occurred nearer eviction day they might have seen more in Old Hog, but people tended to use things forever around here, or else give to a family member or neighbor, or sell or trade stuff away if they thought it might still be useful to someone else; what little had been put out was well and truly spent, easy to toss into the truck. Aden never minded working there.

"You know," said Renny. "People think this neighborhood was named after a pig farm, but it wasn't. Mazareen Hogg owned a manufacturing plant here before he became governor, and the second 'G' got lost along the way."

Aden raised an insulting finger. Renny said that every single time they hit this area, twice a week and three times in bulk week, had done so since the second time they'd been here together. Fourteen times now, which was enough to be either thoroughly annoying or a decent beginning to a running gag; Aden hadn't decided which yet. All because on Renny's first day, Aden had said it to him, in those exact words. That and more, since Aden liked history, the way neighborhoods waxed and waned and

changed character over the years. Aden might have gone on a little too long, but Renny just smiled and listened, and as they left the truck at day's end, said, "Oh, hey, let me introduce myself again. Mazareen Hogg the Seventh. 'Renny' is short for Mazareen, which I'll never forgive my parents for, even if it's a family name."

Renny had clapped Aden's shoulder and walked away whistling, and after that, twice a week, he gave Aden's history lesson back to him as they started their day. Aden was genuinely curious how the Hoggs had gone from the governor's mansion to generic wealth to manual labor, and how it felt to collect garbage on land that used to belong to your family, but they weren't close enough yet to ask such personal questions.

When they stopped the truck for lunch here they rotated between Nash's choices and Aden's. They'd let Renny choose eventually, if he stayed on the job. They ate rice and pickled vegetables sitting on the curb beside the truck; even though bulk day trash was less pungent than the ordinary variety, nobody liked it if they got near. It wasn't a hot day, but the sun was relentless. Aden wiped sweat off his brow with the inside of his shirt. Ripe and getting riper.

"This isn't so bad," Renny said. Aden assumed he meant the food, which was good, or their odor, but then Nash answered, "We haven't hit the Crown yet." Aden realized the kid meant their day, and dropped a hand to his side to make an anti-jinx gesture; it was fine to talk about the odor, but "this isn't so bad" was a beginner's observation. Miles to go.

They reached the Crown's guardhouse at noon, and paused in the gateway for the security check. Sometimes Aden wished their schedule allowed them to do that neighborhood first, when they were fresh and on their toes, but the route wasn't theirs to choose, and anyway, maybe it was better for the Crown's bulk to bounce around on top where it got air, rather than get pushed to the bottom where they wouldn't see if things started to react.

Aden hated the Crown: its wastefulness, its carelessness, not to mention no thought for any danger to the trash collectors. Blue had died

in another ritzy neighborhood, Silverhill, not this one—Aden and Nash had been given this new route so they wouldn't have to pass the site multiple times a week—but Blue's fall nonetheless replayed in his mind as they made their way down these manicured streets too, and he blinked away tears.

The first discard they came to was on Renny's side. It looked easy enough, a storm door laying flat on the sidewalk, and Aden almost didn't bother watching the kid, but a second later he was glad he had.

"Stop!" he shouted as Renny reached for the handle like it was his first day. Renny hesitated, clearly realizing what he'd almost done. He took it by two sides instead, and heaved it over. Aden caught a glimpse of snow through glass as it sailed into the truck.

Renny grinned. "No harm done."

"No harm done?" Aden didn't lower his voice. "You know how the guy before you died."

"I got distracted for a sec. Anyway, there was just a snowy hill in there. Somebody's ski portal or something. No big deal."

All that misplaced confidence. "So you think! How do you know you can get back if you get sucked in, or that you won't freeze to death? Blue accidentally put a foot into the frame of a broken portal and fell off a cliff right in front of me. He fell and fell—" *don't think about the landing* "—and all it took was one wrong step."

"Maybe we need tethers, not gloves." Aden thought for a second that the kid was mocking him, but then Renny followed up with "I'm sorry about your friend. I'll be more careful."

"I'll tell you what," said Aden, breathing deep to calm down. "Why don't we do both sides together today?"

Renny frowned. "You don't have to coddle me. I can do my side."

"Sure, of course, but it'll be faster for us to toss the big stuff together than to each drag it separately." It wasn't quite true, but they'd make up the time if they moved quickly, and it would definitely be safer, as long as Renny didn't reach for any more doorknobs. Only his second monthly bulk day, Aden reminded himself; the kid didn't know any better.

They made their slow circuit. In front of one mansion a designer cauldron, ingredients congealed at the bottom, still smoking; some people were so lazy they'd rather throw out a perfectly good cauldron than deal with cleaning it properly, or even paying someone to clean it for them. More: an armoire with a single chain holding it shut; a box of record albums emitting a faint hum; four tires tied to a lamppost, hovering a foot above the ground; a sofa that had dragged itself into a bush on three good legs to lick a fourth that had been scratched by a cat but looked otherwise fine. Another cauldron.

Aden took time to secure the cauldrons upright. More work to do it right rather than fast, but he had been in the truck once when the dregs of two discarded cauldron spells had sloshed into each other and ignited. Nash had driven to an empty school parking lot, and he and Aden and Blue had watched from a distance as the whole truck caught fire and consumed itself. They all had to get checked by the staff doctor, and they weren't allowed back on the job until they stopped pissing in turquoise; Blue had gotten his nickname from that incident. Definitely better to be careful.

Around the next corner, they came to a life-sized statue of a man holding pruning shears, laying on its side atop a battered box spring.

"I'll get the statue if you get the box spring," Renny said.

"Nah, you take that end and we can get both at once."

When Aden grabbed the box spring, the statue whispered "help me" through stone teeth. Aden almost dropped it in surprise.

"I think the statue talked," he said to Renny, at the feet.

"That's not possible, is it?"

Aden turned back to the statue, aghast. "Can you say something else, buddy?"

It didn't answer. Still, he knew what he had heard. "I don't think this is a statue."

"What else could it be?"

"It looks to me like somebody hexed their gardener and left him for

trash.” He tried to remember if there was a protocol for this. Blue would have known. “That’s attempted murder, right?”

“I’d think so. That’s awful.” Renny looked agitated too. “You want me to call it in?”

Aden nodded.

Renny lowered the statue’s feet and stepped away to make the call. Aden watched him dial, wait, explain, disconnect. He returned shaking his head. “I can’t believe it. They said ‘trash is trash’ and we should do our job. They wouldn’t be saying that if we’d found a body in a rug, but just because it’s stone they don’t think we should bother?”

He contemplated for a second before continuing. “In any normal neighborhood it would be considered murder, but around here nobody gets charged with anything that gauche, and if they were, they’d buy their way out of it.”

“I swear, in all the time I’ve been doing this, I’ve never been asked to junk a person before.” As far as Aden knew, anyway. What if one of those couches or armoires had been a housekeeper or a pool boy and he just hadn’t realized?

Aden fought the urge to walk off the job. He’d almost done it after Blue, too, but good-paying occupations weren’t easy to come by, and Nura still had years of school ahead. And it wasn’t like she was training to be a plastic surgeon; she planned to open a medical clinic in Barre town.

Besides, this wasn’t supposed to be ethically gray. People needed him, and he liked the work. Except on bulk day, which had always felt dangerous, but he’d thought the danger was to his crew. He’d never stopped to think about what else rich people did with their expensive magic; growing up poor himself, until he’d started this job he had only ever seen big spells on television. They still seemed impossible: permanent state changes instead of temporary ones; stable portals big enough for family vacations in other realms. He’d be happy with a pair of impermeable gloves, and even that cost more than his year’s salary.

Nash honked the truck’s horn, reminding Aden they had a schedule to keep.

“Help me get him into the cab,” Aden said.

Renny looked surprised. “What’s the plan?”

“I’ll take him home and see if Nura can unhex him. Otherwise, we’ll try to find somebody who recognizes him.” Aden turned to address the statue. “We’re going to help you.”

The statue didn’t respond. Maybe whoever was inside had used up all their energy with that one cry for help. Luckily, it had been enough to get their attention, and if he spoke again, Nash would hopefully hear him over the engine. They maneuvered the statue into the narrow space behind the bench, careful not to break any fingers. Nash caught Aden’s eye and shook his head, sharing Aden’s disgust.

They tossed the box spring in the back, then continued on their route, picking up a large rolled carpet, which Renny checked for a body, another cauldron with congealed green goo lining the bottom, a run of desks and desk chairs, another cauldron, half-full and sloshing something orange and furry. Clearly whoever had tossed it hadn’t grown up in a nothing-wasted family like Aden’s, he thought as he cleared a secure spot for it. The truck was fuller now, making it hard to find room for odd-shaped objects.

They fell back into something of a rhythm. Aden thought Renny had finally caught on to how to work with both care and efficiency, up until he heard “Ow!” from the front right bumper’s vicinity, followed by a thud.

Aden sprinted around the truck. He and Nash both reached Renny at the same time.

“Why didn’t he wait for you?” Nash asked.

Renny had made it to the next house, and apparently he’d decided to deal with the spinning wheel on his own. All that confidence. Aden lowered his head to Renny’s heart, making sure his chest was still committed to a steady rise and fall, ignoring his own heart’s pounding. Don’t think about Blue. “He’s breathing. I think he’s asleep.”

Nash peeled off Renny’s gloves, then held up his right hand. The sharp had gone through the fabric. “Do you want to kiss him, or should I?”

Aden shook his head, trying to force his panic to subside. “Neither. He didn’t consent, and I’m not getting written up for harassment. Besides, he’s growing on me, but I can’t say I love him.”

“Good points. Crap. I guess we phone in and ask if they want us to turn around or finish?”

That made sense. Nash made the call, while Aden worked the offending piece off the wheel—it was supposed to be a spindle according to his high school history class, but all the media versions showed a needle on a spinning wheel, and nobody went back to original texts these days, not even for big spells. He wrapped it in Renny’s hoodie from the front seat, in case someone needed it to reverse-engineer the spell. He had to work carefully; it seemed to want to prick him even through his doubled gloves.

Nash returned. “They say it sounds like a standard sleeping spell, and we’re supposed to finish the route and then get him back to the garage so the doc can check him out.” He jerked a thumb at the spinning wheel. “You take the sharp off already?”

“Yeah. It’s in his hoodie there. Do they want the wheel?”

“They said junk it. They may not need the needle either, but we’re supposed to hold onto it just in case.”

Aden tossed the defanged into the back. They carried the kid to the cab, then Aden nestled the sweatshirt carefully at his feet, where it shouldn’t be able to do harm through anyone’s boots, even as it hugged up to him like a cat looking for attention.

Aden patted his own pockets as Nash started the truck. “Got a pen?”

Nash reached into his door and handed one over, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m writing down the address in case we have to write a report. They should be cited, at the very least.”

“Like anyone ever gets cited. Nobody cares if we get hurt. Honestly, a sleeping spell was the best possible outcome for that kid today.”

Aden agreed, but jotted down the address anyway, then the address where they’d picked up the gardener, which he’d been repeating in his

head. They finished the day slowly with Nash jumping out to help with larger items: a potted plant the size of a compact car, a chair burping rainbow-colored bubbles that smelled like marshmallows, more cauldrons, more wardrobes, a hideous portrait, a bedframe that eagerly raised and lowered itself to the perfect height, a stone fountain, a spotless bathtub that seemed to repel dirt, two more door-shaped portals. A hazard, that was what it was. A hazard and a waste.

They stopped one more time to wrestle the statue and the bubble chair into Aden's pickup truck; his niece might enjoy that on her birthday. That was why everyone parked outside on bulk day; the occasional finds amidst the junk.

The doctor was waiting when they got to the garage, muttering about how it would be easier if everyone actually filled out their designated kisser form, and how she wished double gloves were mandatory on bulk day. Assuming she could wake him, Aden was pretty sure Renny would remember from now on.

Ms. Jukes looked over her glasses at him when he knocked on her open office door. "Can I help you, Aden?"

"Yeah...we picked up this statue today that I'm pretty sure isn't a statue. It whispered to me."

She frowned. "Did it try to convince you to do anything? I don't have a budget for earplugs, but maybe we can recommend in the next HR newsletter that y'all get some for yourselves."

"It said 'help me.' I'm pretty sure there's a person trapped inside, only dispatch said trash was trash."

"Dispatch knows the regulations."

"That's meant to cover what we can and can't pick up, like how much residue can be at the bottom of a cauldron, or how many items somebody can put out, and what size. They don't say anything about putting out living things because living things aren't trash, so it isn't even covered. If somebody abandoned a dog we'd call animal control."

"But you said it was a statue, so...stone? Marble? Not a living thing."

He balled his fists, wishing smooth Renny were here instead of him. “This is probably a person trapped in stone, not stone to begin with.”

“Unless it’s just talking stone. I’m sure there’s some reason a rich person would want a talking statue. Maybe it plays rock music.”

She looked pleased with her joke; Aden didn’t laugh. “In that case, wouldn’t they want a better-looking statue? It looks like my uncle Rufus. Big ears, balding. And who ever heard of a statue with garden shears in hand?”

“Aden, neither of us is an art critic, and you’re not paid to judge peoples’ trash. Is that all?”

He clearly couldn’t change her mind. He considered stopping at the police station, but if Ms. Jukes and dispatch were so certain, why would the police listen to him? He’d probably get in trouble for taking the statue with him. Better to see if Nura could unhex the guy first.

The kitchen smelled like takeout pizza, their bulk-day tradition. Nura didn’t look up from her textbook as he kicked off his boots and hung his toque and keys on the peg by the door. “Hey, honey. It go okay?”

“Fine for me.” Aden said. “The new guy got stupid, but he’ll be alright. Probably.”

“Probably?” This time Nura put her pencil in the book to mark her place and closed it, professional curiosity engaged. “What’d he hit?”

“A sleeping spell.”

She looked disappointed. That was first-year stuff. “Anything interesting?”

“A cute chair. I put it in the kennel in the back to air out.”

“You’re such a soft touch—”

“I know.”

“—but have you seen yourself lately?”

“Why?”

Nura looked amused. “You’re looking particularly foxy.”

“Thank you?” Aden lifted a hand to slick his hair back and encountered a shape that shouldn’t have been there. “Uh oh.”

He ducked into the hallway bathroom and flipped on the light. His own face stared back from the mirror, but with two pointy, orange-furred ears where human ears should be. His toque must have hidden them earlier, or Nash would've said something.

“You didn't feel those growing?” Nura appeared in the mirror over his shoulder.

“I must have been preoccupied. It was a long afternoon.” Aden tried to think of where he would've picked them up. One of the cauldrons? The hairy rug? He'd been so careful, but it didn't take much.

“Can you hear better?”

Aden concentrated for a second, not really sure what to listen for. “I don't think so?”

“Just appearance, then. That's good.” She grinned. “Now strip for me, fox man.”

Aden undressed and let Nura inspect him for further new developments. Other than a coin-sized patch of red fur on his left thigh, the ears were the only problem. “If they aren't gone in a couple of days I'll go to the clinic at work.”

Nura grabbed a marker and drew a purple circle around the fur. “And if it goes past that line at any point, you're getting checked out immediately, even if you look cute. Anything else? You're usually a save-the-most-interesting-thing-for-last guy, and there's no way a chair wins most interesting.”

She knew him well. “Hexed gardener.”

“Wait, why bring a person home to me instead of the site doctor?”

“He's a statue. Dispatch said ‘trash is trash’ when Renny called in, and statues aren't people and therefore don't have any rights. Even if they were recently people.” He didn't disguise the bitterness in his voice.

“And you're sure it's a real person?”

“Not a hundred percent, but I'm pretty sure he said ‘help me.’”

“That's awful! They should be hexed with the same spell—whoever did it, and also whoever at dispatch told you to trash a living person.”

Aden nodded. He loved that Nura's fury matched the fury he'd felt all day, and that he didn't have any doubt what she'd do next.

She put her hands on her hips. "Okay. Let me at him. You go clean up."

As he walked away, he heard her muttering to herself, "STONE. Sage Tonic or Nevalese Evacuation. Wait one SEC. Do a Secondary Enchantment Check." She had an acronym for everything magico-medical.

In the shower, Aden lingered on his new ears, enjoying the strange sensation. It was funny as long as it was temporary. Not as funny if he started thinking about how easily the spell could have been something more injurious, or even deadly, and he hadn't even noticed it. Nura had done a rotation on the hex ward the year before, and he'd let her spend hours practicing on him; he'd hated it every time, the loss of control, even though he'd been happy to help. It made him feel for this guy even more. Hopefully she'd be able to unhex him, but that didn't change the fact that it shouldn't have happened.

Ordinarily, the thing he couldn't stand was the waste. Perfectly good magical items tossed out, while there were people who could genuinely use them. And if the Crown's residents discarded actual people, that was a whole extra layer of inhumanity beyond waste and not thinking about workers' safety.

He wished he could think of something to do about any of it. He didn't trust the police not to repeat dispatch's line; they might even charge him with theft since the keeping-things-you-hauled practice was not exactly officially condoned. And sure, there was the Board of Magic, but they only got involved on federal policy-level actions. The last time they'd ruled on anything trash-related was before Aden was born, to say that no jurisdiction could dump trash through an open portal, and they'd only done that to head off a war with the Republic of Burria, which had gotten sick of finding themselves the dumpees. Sometimes he felt like he knew too much history.

The gardener sat at the kitchen table drinking tea with Nura when Aden went downstairs again. He looked even more like Uncle Rufus

now that he wasn't stone. She'd let him have the good chair, the one with the leather cushion; another Crown rescue.

"Aden, this is Lennart," Nura said. "His husband is coming to get him. I told him about your ears."

Aden's wave turned into a self-conscious ear-stroke, and he took a seat beside Nura in the sketchiest chair. It was his favorite in terms of looks, tall-backed and sturdy, but it had a strange sharp edge he hadn't been able to sand away.

"Nice to meet you," Aden said, reaching for the third tea.

The man nodded. His fingers laced carefully around his mug like they weren't entirely under his control yet. "Thank you for helping me."

"Of course. I couldn't have junked you."

"You could have," Nura pointed out. "That's apparently the protocol. You're not actually supposed to be putting aside the stuff you do. You're going to say 'everybody does it' but that's if they find a mountain bike or cash. Not everybody would haul around a statue all day in case it was a person."

"He was definitely a person. And everybody grabs stuff that doesn't belong in the trash. Not that you're 'stuff.'"

Lennart interrupted them. "But you took the time to notice me, unlike the people I work —worked—for. I appreciate it."

"It was the right thing to do." Aden rubbed his fuzzy ear again. "Do you know how it happened?"

"No. I must have been hit from behind. I remember pruning topiary, and then I started slowing down, and everything else sped up too fast to see. The first time someone moved me, it was over before I could think of what to do. After that I had a while to think about how to get attention, so I decided to start repeating 'help me' until somebody heard."

"How long were you stuck?"

"About two months, it looks like. I lost track."

"Your husband must have been worried sick! Are you going to go after whoever did this?" Nura exuded fury.

“I don’t think there’s any point in trying. I have no proof beyond your word and mine.” Lennart nodded at Aden, who realized he should have taken a picture. Nash and Renny could vouch, at least. “I’m not sure who did it, or why, and their lawyers would find a way to get the case dismissed anyway. Georg says my boss called and told him I was fired for not showing up to work—like I had a choice! They didn’t even show any concern when he said I hadn’t come home from their place. I’m just happy they threw me out instead of installing me as garden decoration. I could’ve been trapped forever.”

Nura took a sip of tea so slow and delicate that Aden knew she was holding herself back from hurling the mug across the room. This wasn’t her idea of justice. When the gardener’s husband arrived, she would hug him goodbye and exchange numbers with him and tell him to call if he showed any lingering effects, as if he were an official patient. After he’d left she would explode, and Aden would try to calm her, and try to tamp down his own frustration. He agreed with her, but he didn’t know what to do about it.



“There has to be a better system,” he said to Nash the next day, hopping into the cab. He had wrapped a bandanna around his head under his toque, so nobody got any nickname ideas from the ears. Back to normal trash, the kind that might cut you or leak on your shoes, but rarely attacked.

“Heard anything about the kid?”

“No. You?”

A voice below them said, “I heard they had to use some kiss-emulator spell and he woke up speaking in moose.”

Renny swung up to the cab, grinning. “If you understood that, you probably speak moose too.”

“Glad you’re alright,” Nash said. “But for real, what broke the spell?”

“For real? When they realized true love’s kiss wouldn’t cut it, they moved on to other things on our personal surveys. ‘True lunch’ is what worked. A bite of a BLT, my favorite sandwich. They didn’t see any lingering effects, so they cleared me back to work.”

Aden couldn’t tell if the kid was joking or not, though true lunch was as likely as anything. True love was no panacea, and a good meal was just one of many things worth coming back for; Nura had made him fill out all eighty fields on his own personal survey form.

The light rain that had been falling when Aden drove to work got heavier as the morning went on, and by the time they stopped the truck for lunch, all three were soaked. They ate sandwiches in the cab, heater on full blast to act as a dryer, as if they wouldn’t get wet again the second they finished their break.

“What I don’t get,” said Renny between mouthfuls, “is why protective spells aren’t supplied automatically. You’d think it’d be costlier to keep doctors around to try to fix us than to keep us from getting hurt in the first place.”

Nash nodded. “You’d think.”

“The good ones are way too expensive,” Aden said. “Not in the budget.”

“Okay, then. Just better gear, then. There’s got to be money for it somewhere.”

Aden reached for his coffee. “Sure, I agree about the goggles, even if I’m skeptical that ‘there’s got to be money for it’—but also, am I the only who finds it upsetting that we’re junking all these perfectly good things? Sure, some stuff is dangerous, but most is just dirty or last year’s style, and people trash it like it’s got no use anymore. Not to mention Lennart the statue. Like I told you, he didn’t even know why or how he got hexed. He thought it might have been the boss’s kid and his friends messing around. So it’s wasteful, it’s dangerous, it’s irresponsible, and I don’t even know what else. It’s wrong.”

Nash snorted, the sound of someone who had been on the job a long time. “If there was a good solution, don’t you think someone would’ve found it by now?”

“Maybe you were thinking about the two issues individually—safety and inequity.” Renny waved his sandwich, scattering crumbs. “Maybe you need to fix both at once.”

“What are you thinking?” Aden asked.

“If there were some kind of distribution system for stuff, maybe less of it would end up on the street for us to pick up.” Renny looked pleased at having been asked for his opinion for once. “We could slow down and be more deliberate.”

Nash shook his head. “They’d just cut the number of crews and make us all hit more homes. And how do you convince people to do it?”

“That’s easy. For the distribution side, make the Crown feel like they were doing something altruistic. Get someone who does one of those buy-nothing groups in Old Hog to start one that sucks up to rich people. Rich people like to be sucked up to.”

Aden had been thinking while the others went back and forth, and now he spoke up. “It still doesn’t solve the problem of people putting stuff out carelessly. Nobody got in trouble over Blue, or over the spindle that stuck you, Renny, and nobody’s going to get in trouble over the gardener. They don’t care if the stuff they leave out hurts us. We’re invisible.”

“It’s true,” said Renny. “When my family was rich, I promise you we never thought about the people picking up trash. Are you going to finish that sandwi—what?”

Aden wordlessly handed over the second half. He had a terrible idea of how to get them some attention.



Well, he thought at first it was terrible, but in the end it didn’t take much to convince the other crews. Everyone who’d been on the job had known Blue, and everyone had a bulk day story: if not ears, a tail; if not a door portal, a wardrobe; if not a hex, a curse, or a cursed object. If not

an accident of their own, an accident of a crew member, or a former crew member. Not to mention Lennart the stone gardener, who turned out to be the second cousin of Kile from number six crew.

Nura helped them draw up a list of demands, and scheduled it to send to the news outlets at the appointed time on the next bulk day. The morning of, she woke early with him and pinned a laminated copy to Aden's jacket like he was a preschooler. "I'm proud of you."

"Don't say that until we know whether we get what we're asking for." He kissed her goodbye and headed to work. Took his extra protective gear out of habit, though he didn't plan on needing it. When he got to the garage, everyone else was already there milling nervously, with similar notes pinned to their jackets.

"Ready?" Aden asked. "We're going to do this fast, since we don't know how quickly they'll try to stop us." He'd had Nura look it over to make sure it had enough magic in it for all of them, if nobody interrupted before they were done.

Everyone nodded, but nobody moved until Nash held out his hand. "Ready."

Aden propped his phone on his truck's running board to start a live feed, then reached into the cab and pulled out the swaddled spindle. Unwrapping it from Renny's hoodie, he realized that Renny hadn't shown up for this action. He hadn't expected the kid to flake; this was partially his idea.

Aden eyed the spindle-pointy-thing. He didn't like getting stuck by things on the best of days, but this was necessary, and at least Nura had said that its spell included self-sanitization. Anyway, it wouldn't be difficult; even now it leaned toward his skin, though he planned to go last. They all lowered themselves to the garage floor with various grunts and grumbles, so they wouldn't fall far when they nodded off.

Nash went first, juggling the sharp from one hand to the other as it tried to get close.

"Faster," said Aden. "We need to get everyone down before Ms. Jukes notices."

Nash sighed and pricked his finger. “Meatball sandwich, please,” he said, before hitting the deck.

Sten took it from the unconscious Nash, and did the same. It continued around the circle until it got to Aden. With one last glance at the office, out of which Ms. Jukes should be emerging any second to ask why nobody had left, he took the spindle from Kile’s unconscious grasp. His turn.



When he woke, Nura stood over him, holding a box of something smoky and delicious-smelling. He looked around to discover he was still on the garage floor with everyone else standing around watching.

“What happened? Am I last?”

“Pretty much. You and DeVoe, whose favorite lunch is something they had on vacation once; the doctors are still tracking it down. It’s taken a whole day to find the right meals for everyone. Some hadn’t filled out their forms, so there was a lot of trial and error involved. Renny woke first, since the doctors already knew his sandwich, and you’re last because your favorite lunch involves my secret sauce. I’m flattered. I refused to make it until they started meeting your demands, of course, but the complaints helped too. Rich neighborhoods upset that their bulk hadn’t been picked up yet.”

“Did they agree to everything? And did you say Renny first? He wasn’t even here.”

The familiar cheery voice came from behind Nura. “I came late, but I managed to poke myself before they figured out which of you had the spindle. I never pass up a free BLT.”

“Let me finish before you give him trouble for being late,” Nura said. “The city agreed to put money for safety equipment into next year’s budget. They—”

“Wins all around. We did it! I’m going to find Ms. Jukes and ask

if she'll buy us all drinks to wash down lunch." Renny walked away whistling.

Nura watched him saunter toward the office. "You're right. He's a lot. Is it weird if I kind of like him?"

Aden held out his hand. "I think I earned that sandwich."

Nura passed him the rest of his true lunch. It tasted even better than usual; success slathered in secret sauce.

Except she'd been interrupted. "What about the other things we asked for? A program to redistribute used magical goods? An inquiry into what happened to Lennart?"

"That program would have to be a city council thing, out of your bosses' purview. Lennart apparently hasn't filed a complaint, and they say there's no official record of it happening."

Aden lowered his sandwich. "We called it in!"

"That's the weird part," Nura said. "They have no record of the call. Do you know who the dispatcher was?"

"No. Renny called. I heard it." Aden frowned, considering. "I heard his side, anyway. But why would he fake a call?"

He finished the sandwich, though he'd lost his appetite. It didn't make sense.

He thought about it all night. Considered asking Renny, or checking if Nash had overheard the call, though as he remembered it, Renny had stepped away from the truck. Maybe it had been logged wrong by dispatch.

It bothered him enough that on his next day off, Aden went to the library. The internet would probably have been an easier first step, but he had always been a fan of old-school research. Less distraction. The books about the Hogg family mostly focused on the original Mazareen. The stuff he'd always known, that got repeated more or less the same way in the history books as he'd learned in school.

"The Hogg family?" The librarian didn't make it sound like he was asking anything he shouldn't. "I'm sure there's something in the newspapers."

Aden expected to be turned loose in the ancient microfiche, but the librarian swiveled to a computer and pulled up a digital archive. “Something” turned out to mostly be society pages in the older papers, then business journals: bad investments, closed businesses, sold property. What surprised him was that the most recent articles weren’t about Renny’s grandfather. Renny had implied that the family’s crash had been generations ago, but the last articles talked about his father ten years before. He’d been the one to finally lose the family’s last money, and their mansion in the Crown.

Aden stared at the address. It was on the same street where they’d found Lennart, between that house and the one where Renny had gotten himself hexed. Renny had never mentioned it in the weeks he’d gone down that very street with them. He’d made his family’s wealth sound like ancient history. Did it feel strange picking up someone else’s trash at the mansion he’d grown up in? He’d probably never thought about trash while he lived there.

Aden broiled fish for dinner that night, and made a decent salad, and when Nura got home she chewed and listened as he explained what he’d found. He half-expected her to dismiss his research as a waste of time, but a look crossed her face that told him she’d made a connection beyond his own, and reminded him that however smart he thought he was, she was smarter.

She didn’t explain herself, just put down her fork and raised her phone and searched for a number. “Hi, Lennart. This is Nura, who—yes. Are you doing okay? No loose teeth, no stomach issues? Good. Listen, I have a funny question, but you remember when you told me you thought you might have been hexed by your boss’s son? Do you happen to know the names of the friends he hung out with?” She looked disappointed. “Or, how about, the son’s name? Thanks! My best to you both.”

She disconnected the call and started typing. Aden waited, and two minutes later, she looked at him triumphantly. “I don’t know about you, but when he said he thought the son’s friends had done it, I assumed

that meant little kids messing around, too young to know better. The son is twenty-five! Archer Barfield, of the shipping Barfields. Then I ran a search for Archer Barfield, Crown Academy, and he was on the junior varsity diving team with, wait for it, Mazareen Hogg VII! And the junior debate team. He made varsity diving too, but Renny wasn't on that one, probably because by then his family lost their money and he ended up wherever he ended up."

Aden sat back in his chair, and one of its legs gave way. He'd salvaged this one in Old Hog; it had lasted a while, anyway. He scrambled up from the floor and spent a moment contemplating the spot where the wood had snapped, considering the connections Nura had made. "So, what do we do with that?"

"Probably nothing. What's there to do? It's a weird connection. Nobody's going to face any consequences for nearly ruining two lives." Nura looked angry again, and it took Aden a minute to understand. What happened to Blue had hit them all hard, but he'd never really thought about it from Nura's position, the partner waiting for a loved one whose job didn't keep them safe. Lennart's husband had been in the same boat too; gardeners usually made it home at night. Life held risks—her own magicomedical career path was full of them—but these particular things shouldn't have been risky.

"I've got another terrible idea, love," he said at last.



Aden had never hexed anyone in his life.

They had just eaten lunch, and Aden had smeared Nura's concoction onto Renny's handhold before they headed through the Crown's gate, so that the stone started at his hands, a slow-moving hex, unlike the one that had hit Lennart.

"Hey, something's weird," Renny said. "I'm stuck to the truck."

“That’s weird,” Aden agreed.

“It’s...it’s moving down my arms. Can you help?”

They reached the next house, and Aden hopped down to grab the trash on the corner. “The thing is,” he said, hustling a little so they’d stay on schedule even with only him doing the work. “I might have a question or two for you while you’re a captive audience.”

“What are you talking about?”

Aden hit record on his phone. “Did you and your friend hex Lennart the gardener?”

“This isn’t funny. I can’t feel my arms.”

“I agree. Not funny at all. Did you do it?”

Renny tried pushing himself away from the truck with his feet, but ended up hanging by his petrifying arms. He scrabbled to get his foothold back. “Alright, yes. It was an accident. We were shooting rabbits in the yard with a water pistol full of stonebrew Archie had ordered, and didn’t see the yard guy trimming the topiary.”

Stoning rabbits was an asshole move in itself, but Aden let that go. “Why didn’t you help him?”

“We didn’t want to get in trouble. It’s illegal to turn people into stone, you know. Like you’re doing to me right now.”

“Turning people into stone might be illegal, but statues are just trash, I’ve been told, so in a few minutes it won’t matter,” Aden said. “Anyway, you must have gotten something on yourself. It’s not my fault you’re sloppy at your job.”

“If you didn’t do it, why won’t you help me? It’s up to my shoulders now!”

“I’m not done asking you questions. You left him there?”

“No, we dragged him into the bushes until we figured out what to do. Nobody in the Barfield family ever leaves the terrace other than Archie. His parents just like looking out over the gardens from above.”

“Then you got this job to get rid of him?”

“Then I got this job to get rid of him. My dad was happy I wanted to try manual labor, and it was easy enough to convince Ms. Jukes to let me

have the route I wanted. She likes me. I can't move my legs now." He looked on the verge of tears.

"You're saying doing this job for all these weeks was easier than just trying to unhex the guy?"

Renny frowned. "We didn't think of unhexing. We would've gotten in trouble. Archie isn't even supposed to hang out with me anymore. Anyway, I really did need a job. I don't hate this, believe it or not. Working with you guys is okay."

"And you pretended to call dispatch?"

"Yeah, but the regulation is real. I looked it up and couldn't believe what I read. They would've said the same thing, even if I'd called for real."

Aden was still having trouble following the logic. "You found a horrible regulation, and instead of doing something about it, you decided to use it to basically murder someone?"

"When you put it that way, it sounds bad."

"It IS bad, Renny! Just because you didn't succeed doesn't make it okay."

Renny frowned. "So, you're going to do the same to me, and pretend it was an accident? That doesn't make you any better. Why don't you let me go, and I'll get my parents to talk to someone about changing that regulation. They still know people."

"What people?"

"Judges, city council, lobbyists. They can still make things happen." The truck lurched forward. Renny looked uncomfortable. "What will it take for you to reverse this? I said I'd talk to my parents. I'm going to yell for help."

Aden dumped the next can. "This is the Crown. You know as well as I do that nobody will hear you. They're all inside so they don't have to see our truck blemish their perfect streets. So, remember what you said in the truck when we were talking about solutions? Something about starting a buy-nothing group that makes rich people

feel altruistic? The city rejected that idea, but I'll bet you know somebody who could make that happen."

"My—my mom. My mom is on the Old Hog neighborhood association board, but she still knows everyone in the Crown neighborhood association. Maybe she can get them to redistribute stuff rather than tossing it. Neighborhood beautification, we can call it. They all complain about the unsightliness of garbage days, so maybe we can convince them that this will make it disappear before it ever hits the street."

As he said the word "street" his lower jaw solidified. Aden grabbed another garbage can and Renny's eyes widened.

"Okay, so I'm holding you to all of that. I know you'll do it; I recorded your confession on my phone. I'm giving a copy to Lennart, and a copy to my girlfriend, and Nash, and I'm making a couple more so you can't find them all. And if Lennart decides to press charges against you and your friends, he still can, since he was the one you actually harmed. Maybe you can help him get his old job back if he wants it, too, or a job working for someone whose son is less of a creep. Sound good?"

"Sounds good," whispered the statue attached to the truck. "Now help me. Please?"

Aden dumped two more cans before turning back to the Renny-shape. "Good job saying please! It's temporary. It'll reverse itself in ten minutes. Enjoy the break and don't worry—I've been doing your side of the street too."

If Renny answered, Aden didn't hear it, though he knew he'd get an earful when the hex wore off. In the meantime, he fell back into the rhythm of routine. If he admitted it to himself, he'd kind of enjoyed this: actual answers, actual solutions, something like retribution, something like justice. All in a day's work; he jogged toward the next trashcan.

(Editors' Note: "One Man's Treasure" is read by Matt Peters on the Uncanny Magazine Podcast, Episode 50C.)



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